

HECTOR DUVAL

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

FROM

THE ADVENTURES OF ANTOINE

THE ROCKINGHAM DIAMOND

THE BAITER OF LONDON

Under the pen name HUGH ADDISON

SALONICA AND AFTER

COS CAMIOS

HECTOR DUVAL

A ROMANCE

BY

COLLINSON OWEN



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To W. A. McWhirter

PROLOGUE

THE Marquis de Malvoison-Montigny, elbow on table, rubbed one of his handsome side-whiskers with a forefinger—a gesture which with him signified a certain amount of irritation. He also sighed gently.

“My dear,” he said to his companion, in the tone of one who has already several times made the same suggestion, “I do beg of you to take a glass of this *fine champagne* with me. You could not find a better in all Paris. It will do you good.”

She shook her head once more. A pretty head despite the monumental flowered hat that crowned it. Altogether, indeed, a gracious young person, although the style of her dress did not quite suggest the lady. A lady’s-maid, perhaps.

The Marquis frowned slightly, and poured out another glass of liqueur brandy for himself. It was the year 1884, and the frown of a Marquis perhaps meant a trifle more in those days than such a phenomenon has come to mean since. It certainly meant a great deal to Louise Marly. Especially as this was their last meeting. One of many, in this same private dining-room of the famous Maison Dorée, overlooking the crowded Boulevard des Italiens. And now the last.

She raised her dark eyes to study him as he turned to look towards the window. She knew that even in these heavily charged moments his thoughts were out there, with the scene which the window almost overlooked, and

not with her. A very striking man, the Marquis de Malvoisin-Montigny, although now well on in his fifties—which in the period of 1884 was generally regarded as being quite an age. But not in the case of the Marquis, who had an air almost twenty years younger. That handsome profile, on which the candlelight of the table was now shining, was familiar all over Paris, in quarters high and low. A man of innumerable adventures, a confirmed bachelor, a gay Marquis. To his companion he seemed something approaching a god. It accounted for much in the atmosphere of this last dinner together. She might as well expect a king to marry her.

It was, she was well aware, the first night of that new opera everybody was talking about—Massenet's *Manon* at the Opéra Comique, just over the way from where they were sitting. And nothing would make Hector miss that. For more than twenty years he had never missed a first night of importance. Everybody in Paris knew that too. It was almost time now for the new opera to begin. Of course the curtain would be very late in going up on a first night. That was to be expected. But already the crowd of fashionables would be gathering. She could hear the horses of their carriages prancing along the boulevard below as she sat there with him. In the foyer and in the boxes of the theatre the people of his world would already be grouping together, talking and bowing, pointing out this person and that, exchanging scandal, quizzing each other through lorgnettes and opera glasses.

That was where he wanted to be, now, as they sat in the private room with the dinner she had hardly touched, just over. It was his life.

It was her last night in Paris. It was his last night with her. But, more important than either of those, it was the first night of *Manon*. He would have to be leaving her very soon.

As for the Marquis, he was thinking, not for the first

time, that sooner or later a woman, of whatever kind or station, proclaims herself a nuisance. Even this charming Louise, so much above her station in many ways, whom he had first spied one day in the Avenue du Bois, and later surprisingly found in service in the house of an acquaintance. In a flash he had then realized that she recognized him, and so there was adventure already afoot for one who was famous for never being able to overlook a pretty woman, wherever she belonged.

True this awkward situation was not entirely the fault of Louise. No, it could not be said to be all her fault. And she had been so submissive all through. Perhaps that was what was wrong with Louise—from her own point of view. Had she a little more assertion she might even now carve out a considerable career for herself in Paris. But although pretty enough for anything, she was not of that type. Instead, she was going to bury herself far away somewhere in the provinces, down in some forgotten hole in the South, and marry the man who it seemed was still anxious to marry her, on any conditions. Yes, she had been extraordinarily submissive. No fuss . . . Still, it was an absurd situation.

He turned away from the window and the rumour of the traffic of fashion down below, and looked at her across the candle-lit table. He must be going very shortly, and something suitable must be said between two who were parting in such circumstances.

"You have no doubts, my dear, about the future? You are convinced you may rely on him utterly?"

"So he wrote me. . . . Yes, I am quite sure."

"He must be a good man."

"Yes."

"That is excellent. . . . Twenty thousand francs is quite a presentable sum of money, Louise."

At that, something in the look of her dark eyes penetrated even his selfishness.

"I mean, little one, that it will be very useful. Money does much. What is more, it shall be twenty-five thousand. There!"

She did not speak for a moment.

"I had not thought of more," she said, after the pause. "But if you say so. It shall be for him."

The Marquis hated talking about prospective children. It was always an unpleasant subject. But some stray gleam of real compassion penetrated him as he looked at her. Her face had been very pale when he first found her waiting in the room that evening, but now it was warmed by the candle-glow, and her dark eyes were soft and lustrous. . . . Too lustrous. But that was to be expected in the circumstances. She was really devilishly pretty.

"You say 'him.' You seem sure of it."

"I feel sure. I want it to be a son. I know it will be. I shall name him after you. If I may."

"Certainly." His white teeth showed in a smile. "I have a fairly pleasing selection—Jean, Pierre, Xavier, Hector, Marie . . ."

"It shall be Hector, of course. The name I have always called you."

"What is the good man's name did you say—Duval?"

"Yes."

"Hector Duval. It would be quite a good name. But it may be a girl, Louise." The Marquis hoped so. He preferred girls in circumstances such as these. There was less chance of complications later.

"No. I feel sure it will be a boy."

"Ah well." He produced his gold watch, and glanced at it. At his action she gathered herself together, as with an effort, and rose.

"No, no, Louise," he said indulgently, his hand upraised. "We have still a few minutes."

She remained standing.

"It will be better to go now," she said. "You must not be late."

For the first time he wondered whether he detected a trace of bitterness in her tone. If so, he decided that it would be simpler for both of them if he affected not to notice it. Scenes, as he so well knew, were sometimes unavoidable. But it would be ridiculous to have even the mere suspicion of one when the slightest pretence of obtuseness on his part was sufficient to avoid it. He rose also.

"Perhaps you are right, little one." He stood over her, and taking her shoulders in his two hands he bent down and kissed her kindly on one cheek, and then the other.

"I trust you will be happy, Louise—you and all of you. I shall often think of you, often. Tenderly. Adieu."

"Adieu."

He kissed her again on the cheek, with the complacent air of one who felt that all was well, or passably so. Then gathering up his silk hat and evening cloak and cane, which lay on a sofa, he took her by the arm and led her to the door.

HECTOR DUVAL

CHAPTER I

I

It was very obvious to his customers that Hector Duval was the victim of some unusual emotion. He, usually so suave and yet so dignified, seemed to be curiously nervous on this particular morning, and not quite master of himself. M. Maujis, the Sous-Préfet of St. Médard-sur-Rhone, could have sworn that he saw Hector's hand tremble slightly as he pursued his important task on the Sous-Préfet's ample chin. Even in an ordinary barber this would have been remarkable—and disagreeable—enough. The hands of barbers of whatever quality are not supposed to tremble at their work. And Hector Duval was not an ordinary barber. He was, indeed, not ordinary in any way. It is true that he kept the most select establishment of its kind in St. Médard, so that it was something of a mark of distinction to be one of his regular *clientèle*. But there were other things even more remarkable in Hector Duval, which gave his shop an air possessed by no other.

There came a terrible moment when the impossible happened. Slightly, ever so slightly, Hector gashed the official's chin. M. Maujis flinched. Hector was profuse in apologies, produced cotton-wool, and something from a small bottle, and dabbed the tiny wound solicitously. Such a thing had never been known to happen before.

"But what is the matter with you to-day, Hector?" the Sous-Préfet rapped out in a low but intense voice. "You are not yourself."

"I ask a thousand pardons, Monsieur le Sous-Préfet,"

returned Hector contritely. "It is true I am not quite myself to-day. I did not sleep well last night."

It was not too convincing an explanation, and the Sous-Préfet showed that he thought so. The official chin was not there to be the victim of a barber's indiscretions—even if that barber was Hector. M. Maujis showed his displeasure as he stalked out, with one hand ostentatiously touching his chin.

M. Moisson, the jeweller, also noticed that something was wrong. He came to Hector two or three times a week to have his beard trimmed—the finest black beard in all St. Médard, and a source of intense personal pride to M. Moisson. It was a source of amazement to him, then, when Hector took the silky adornment indifferently between his fingers, and clipped and snipped in the most perfunctory, dreamy manner.

Usually, the beard entered into the conversation, and Hector—who himself possessed a fine blonde beard and in every way was to be regarded as the fount of knowledge on such a matter—never failed to pass an adroit compliment. To M. Moisson—and to Mme. Moisson also, he being a happily married man—his beard meant almost as much as his business.

But this morning Hector was *distract*. His fine, artistic touch was missing. The black beard might have been a dead thing between his fingers, and he looked down on it as though it meant nothing to him; not with that fine appraising look, head slightly on one side, with which he usually regarded the handsomest beard in town. M. Moisson chafed inwardly as he noted these things. It needed the contemplation of himself in the glass, where he could see that the bold Assyrian outline of his beard was as splendid as ever, to restore him to his usual equanimity. But he was decidedly short in his manner as he went out. M. Moisson would have been suitably distressed if he had heard that all Paris had disappeared in an earthquake.

But he would never have lifted his head again if anything had happened to his beard.

So matters went on with Hector throughout the morning, and on a number of occasions he was asked what was the matter with him. He replied shortly or absently to these inquiries, but to his excellent friend Dr. Lemoine he was more communicative.

"But what is the matter with this good Hector to-day?" the Doctor asked breezily. "You look as though you have passed a bad night. And yet, God knows, there is little enough of dissipation to be had in this quiet hole of ours. Unless, indeed, you are luckier than most." And the Doctor laughed happily as the cloth was tucked round his collar.

"It is true that I passed a bad night," Hector returned gravely. "I hardly slept."

"Then, my friend, you had better come to see me."

A light seemed to come into Hector's eyes, and he stood for a moment with his razor poised in air, thoughtful.

"What you say is true," he replied. "Nothing could be better. But not professionally. As a friend, if I may say so. I will come to-night, if I may. There is something I should like very much to talk to you about."

"By all means," said the Doctor heartily. "At nine o'clock, before I depart for the *cercle*. I shall be at your disposition, my dear Hector."

"I thank you, infinitely," replied Hector, almost fervently, and applied himself to his task with something like his usual zest.

But with the departure of the Doctor the cloud descended on him again. He was aware that many a time his elderly chief assistant, the excellent Paillasse, stole a look in his direction. He knew that the second assistant, recently acquired—a young man who left no particular impression on the mind—was more interested in what was happening with "le patron" than in the work he was

doing. He was aware of the atmosphere of curiosity or surprise shown by the customers at his demeanour. But none of these things seemed to matter to him. He was, on that day, as far removed in spirit from his barber's shop as any man could be.

His conduct, both as a barber and as an individual, was usually so irreproachable, and even distinguished, that no wonder the *clientèle*, recruited almost exclusively from the professional men and best shopkeepers of the town, noted and even commented on his strange demeanour. Hector was something of an institution in St. Médard. His hair-dressing establishment was a recognized rendezvous, almost a club, into which the ordinary citizen rarely dreamed of penetrating, and Hector was almost "one of them." This was not, by any means, simply because he was an excellent barber. He was recognized as an artist in other directions. Hector, indeed, had pretensions to literature, and not without reason. He was something of a poet. Many of his verses had been published in the *Dépêche*, the local weekly newspaper, and later gathered into a small volume which had enjoyed quite an encouraging local sale. Many a local damsel, after dipping into the little book had decided that this Hector was undoubtedly interesting. He felt a lot of things—judging by his poetry. And he was decidedly handsome. A pity, rather, that he should be a barber. And curious that he should be the son of that undistinguished little official of the *Octroi*, who, though dead, was still remembered in the town.

Even more important than the poems, which were known, were the plays, which had never been seen. It was generally understood that he had written a number of these, including several tragedies. Dr. Lemoine, who had seen them, was of opinion that they showed very high merit. And Dr. Lemoine was accounted the greatest *amateur* of literature in St. Médard. He often discussed books with Hector.

Thus the *clientèle*, none of whom had Hector's confidence as the Doctor had, hardly quite knew how to place him in their minds, wavering a little between their just conception of a man as a barber, and their respect for him as a poet and dramatist. But altogether they were inclined to be proud of him, and agreed that quite conceivably he might one of these days do something in the literary world. "He knows his Molière, that young man," the Doctor would remark when Hector's name came up at the *cercle*, and that went a long way.

So it was that for long past Hector, while clipping beards, had been dreaming dreams. He felt the urge towards literary fame within him; felt indeed, sometimes, that he was capable of realizing such a dream. He felt a thousand surprising things which he would never have dared to mention in St. Médard—not even to the Doctor. And fate had made him a barber.

II

And for him to describe himself on this particular day as being "not quite himself" was an utterly inadequate description of his state of mind. He was dumbfounded, dazzled, turned inside out and upside down—in short, *bouleversé*. He did not know whether he was on his spiritual head or his heels, but he knew he ought to be in the seventh heaven of delight. Only—somehow he mistrusted this wondrous thing that had happened to him. Fame does not really come to one as a bolt from the blue. One only reads of that happening to others, in which case it seems quite natural. But for him it was too amazing.

The shock had come the evening before. He was reading through his favourite Paris newspaper, *Le Jour*, when his amazed eyes suddenly beheld a paragraph which called the world to witness that *he*—Hector

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Duval, of St. Médard—was a writer whom France ought to honour.

He had been reading down a half-column of Parisian tragedies, all most cleverly and convincingly described in three lines. Murder and suicide, robbery and arson, the penalty of ill-gotten gold and the despair of unrequited love—all these things were given the meed of three lines, and no more. It was as though mankind suffered, sinned and died to make an agile journalist's daily holiday.

It was a column he often read—these sparks thrown off from the great glow of that life of Paris which he had never seen and passionately desired to know. He often reflected on these epitomes of existence—their pathos and tragedy, the comedy, irony and squalor of them. They were, he told himself—in those moods of depression which came to him too often—so very like Life; so short and tragic—and then three lines!

He had just read the three line chronicle of a girl who, forsaken by her lover, had thrown herself into the Seine and been recovered dead, when suddenly, immediately below this staccato and pathetic history of a life, he found himself staring at the wonderful announcement concerning himself. It was like the shock of unexpected thunder.

He read it, and the type danced before his eyes. He shut his eyes, and it was some moments before he dared trust his senses and read it again. There was no doubt about it. He was awake. His eyes had played him no trick. He was not mad. There were drums in his ears, but there before him was the black, unemotional type with its terrific announcement:

HONOUR TO A POET

“ France is often too tardy in recognizing and applauding the genius of her gifted sons. Writers whose talents should claim for them instant recogni-

tion languish in obscurity, and too often only when the tomb has claimed one of them—after how many trials and bitter disappointments?—does France know of the bright torch that is extinguished. Such, however, is not to be the fate of M. Hector Duval, of St. Médard-sur-Rhone, whose great talents as poet and dramatic author are soon to be fêted by some of the most illustrious of his Parisian confrères."

He read it and re-read it—then looked up from the newspaper, and around him. He was sitting alone in the Café du Commerce at the time—and the café looked just as it always did. At the next table to him a party of four were playing dominoes, rather noisily. He knew them all—but at this moment they might have belonged to another planet. The world had become unreal.

He sat back in his seat and regarded the room. Mme. Bustard, the fat old *patronne*, sat enthroned as usual at the counter where the waiters handed in their checks. She had known him for years. She was there, placid, just as she had always been. The whole world had changed—yet she was just the same. What would she say when she heard this amazing news? And what would everybody say? And why had somebody not come rushing up to him, with transfigured face, to share with him this wonder?

He had dreamed his dreams—had hoped that some day he would do something that would bring him recognition, barber or not. He had never felt that he was a barber—despite his acceptance of the lot which had been his.

But this! Never had he imagined anything such as this. And on so little—Paris to be moved for so little! He wondered at that. There was real music in those poems of his. He knew that. He had felt enough in the writing of them—haunted as he had always been by

that odd feeling that he was misplaced in life, that he was not where he ought to be, that he was born for something different. It was a feeling which he had always tried to suppress, because it seemed so absurdly romantic; but it had crept into his poems. He knew that Dr. Lemoine was sincere when he praised them. But who could have imagined this?

If only somebody would speak to him about it. But nobody seemed to realize that something fabulous had happened. Perhaps he ought to show *Le Jour* to somebody—to Dr. Lemoine, at least? But something held him back—he hardly knew what. A doubt of some kind. He felt that if he spoke to anybody the dream would instantly dissolve.

He sat there until late, re-reading the paragraph from time to time, in a sort of stupor. If it were only true it might save him—rescue him from this barbering which now he realized, as he had never done before, that he loathed with all his soul.

III

He went home and passed an almost sleepless night. Though his eyes were shut that paragraph danced before his vision, and his brain repeated, interminably, its message:

“Honour to a Poet: France is often too tardy in recognizing and applauding the genius of her gifted sons . . .”

Incredible! Mysterious! He was thrilled by elation, and assailed by doubt. When he did sleep it was fitfully, and he was disturbed by dreams—curiously mocking dreams.

So that he went to his shop next morning dazed,

mechanically moving through a day which was like no other day he had ever known. Still puzzling and still doubting about that amazing paragraph. If only somebody else had spoken to him about it he would have given one cry of relief and accepted the miracle. With the entry of each new customer he hoped that the words would be spoken. But evidently nobody else had noticed it.

As soon as it was possible, after a bewildering and miserable day, he handed over the care of the shop to Paillasse and fled from it.

His steps took him at once to the tobacco shop a little way down the street, where he bought his Paris newspapers. *Le Jour*—despite its tragedies in three lines—was a leisurely journal with a pronounced literary flavour, which was the reason for his preference for it. It arrived late in St. Médard, and was little read there, which might account for nobody else having seen the wonderful paragraph. He had been comforting himself with that thought all day. He bought that day's copy, not long arrived, and feeling like a man with a guilty secret, hurried off with it to the Café du Commerce, the principal rendezvous of the town. Hector was not a member of the charmed *Cercle de l'Union*, the town's leading club, but he often met members of the *clientèle* in the café.

The evening was still early, and he was pleased to see that nobody was there who would be likely to interrupt him. He wanted to be alone. Ordering his usual cognac he opened out the new copy of *Le Jour* and ran through it feverishly. Perhaps there might be another reference to him. But though he searched every column and every corner, there was nothing more. . . .

He felt depression stealing over him, and to combat it took from his pocket the copy of the day before. For the fiftieth time he read the fateful paragraph. He took a long draught of his cognac—and became aware that his

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name was called and that Dr. Lemoine was hurrying towards him across the room, pushing chairs aside in his haste, and waving a newspaper on high.

At last!

"You have seen?" the Doctor cried in great excitement.

"In *Le Jour* of yesterday?" Hector exclaimed hoarsely, jumping to his feet.

"But no! In *Le Progrès* of this morning. Look!"

Hector snatched the newspaper from him, and read the paragraph indicated by the Doctor. It said simply:

HONOUR TO A POET

"A movement has been started among certain well-known *littérateurs* of Paris to recognize the high merit as poet and dramatist of M. Hector Duval, of St. Médard-sur-Rhone, whose work deserves to be known to a wider public."

Hector gazed breathless at this new wonder.

"But read this!" he cried, thrusting the other newspaper towards the Doctor.

Dr. Lemoine read the longer and more generous paragraph, and his eyes started. Then he nodded his head sagely for what seemed an interminable time, while Hector watched him, transfixed. At last the Doctor spoke. There was no shadow of doubt or misgiving in his tones.

"There we are, my friend," he exclaimed with conviction. "Your day has arrived. It is fame that has come to you! What did I tell you?"

Hector drew a long breath, and sank back to his seat. He only needed this. That terrible load of doubt was lifted from his heart. It was true then, it must be true! Why had he hesitated in believing it before? It was fame, success, glory! He could leave the barber behind him.

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He could have shouted aloud for joy and relief—and suddenly, he did not know how, found himself lying across the marble table, crying.

Dr. Lemoine patted him soothingly on the shoulder.

“My friend, my dear friend,” he said.

CHAPTER II

I

NEXT day the *clientèle* knew all about the wonderful news, and Hector held something like a reception at the shop. He trimmed beards soberly, and received the warm felicitations of his customers with a becoming blend of dignity and deference.

Everybody was most cordial. Only M. Vibert, the chemist, was a little malicious.

"Stuck to hairdressing," he said. "It is sure. Everybody needs it, just as they need pills. You will find it more profitable than literature."

"One can never tell," replied Hector discreetly, but longing to tug the beard of this disturber of his great joy.

At the club that night Hector's good fortune was the chief subject of conversation, and it was agreed that the community ought to be proud of him. Dr. Lemoine received warm congratulations, as one who was somehow partly responsible for the great honour that had befallen Hector and the town.

"What did I tell you?" said the Doctor, delighted. "He knows his Molière, that young man."

"But tell me," piped out the voice of M. Pujot, the Notary, "how have they heard of him in Paris? That is what I can't understand."

This was something of a poser for the good Doctor, but he rose to the occasion decisively.

"But those in literary circles in Paris keep an eye out for rising authors," he explained stoutly. "There are academies founded specially to encourage new writers. Somebody has no doubt read his poems, or heard of him as a writer of plays."

This rather doubtful explanation was accepted by the company. After all, why should not the larger world have heard of the progress of literature and the drama in St. Médard? Was it not from the provinces that Paris drew nearly all its great writers—all its great men, for the matter of that?

The idea of Hector's genius was now firmly fixed in their minds, and they did not want it removed. They had seen it in *Le Jour* and *Le Progrès*, and that settled it. Several of them remarked that they had thought the same thing long ago. And M. Pujot's further remark that there was still something about it he could not understand was regarded as the quibbling of a legal mind. He was told that, like all lawyers, he was too difficult, and that a prolonged acquaintance with the frailties of human kind had made him suspicious of everybody and everything.

"Nobody believed in Sardou at first," said the Doctor, and this was regarded as crushing.

The fame of Hector soon spread beyond the confines of the *clientèle*, and the tall young man with the blonde Vandyke beard and the rather luxurious hair was pointed out in the street as one who was about to be honoured by the literary world of far-off Paris. His handsome beard and ample locks no longer suggested the barber, but became at once the outward signs of literary genius, according to the accepted canons. Somebody likened him to Alfred de Musset—there was certainly some slight resemblance to that other famous poet—and this further increased the growing esteem for Hector.

The matter which now preoccupied his friends was as to

the manner in which Paris would show its recognition of the genius of the poet of St. Médard. Hector himself, who in the meantime went on with his barbering with what calm he could command, was a prey to the liveliest imaginings, letting his fancy trip from one bright picture to another in the glorious future he was now planning for himself. All the Paris newspapers were eagerly scanned, and one day, a week after the first discovery, another paragraph was discovered in *Le Jour*. It ran :

“ Our readers will remember that a movement has been started to pay a fitting tribute to the genius of M. Hector Duval, of St. Médard, one of the most promising of our younger writers. The ceremony will take the form of a banquet of honour to be given shortly at the Café de Paris, and an influential committee is now making the necessary arrangements.”

The announcement caused a further sensation in the town.

“ The Café de Paris. Oh, la la ! ” exclaimed Dr. Lemoine, rolling his eyes, and the members of the *cercle* vied with each other in descriptions of wonderful—and mythical—dinners at the famous restaurant during their visits to the capital.

Hector was strangely disturbed by this new announcement. Mingled with his exaltation was a curious little feeling of fear and apprehension which he could not explain. The Doctor, of whom he was now seeing a great deal, would not hear of this.

“ You ought to be the happiest man in France,” said the Doctor heartily. They were sitting late at night talking in his study. The Doctor had produced a bottle of wonderful old Burgundy—a ripe Chambertin. A bachelor, he could afford to live just as he pleased. A

majestic wine cellar, built up with care during the past thirty years, was one of his chief joys.

"I know, I know. . . . It is wonderful," returned Hector. "And yet—somehow—I fear it. Why should this amazing thing happen to me? Who is this mysterious being who knows all about me and of whom I know nothing? Why should somebody in Paris suddenly interest himself in an obscure barber living in a little hole of the provinces, hundreds of miles away? It is too extraordinary."

The Doctor held up his glass under the mellow lamp-light.

"*Regardez-moi ça.* Isn't that colour wonderful," he said, apparently with no reference to what Hector had just said. "For twenty years it has been lying in the cellar underneath—in a black, dark bottle, covered with cobwebs. We bring it up to the light—and it pours forth like laughing sunshine. When my hand stretched forth to take up that bottle from its dusty resting-place had that bottle anything to say in the matter? No. It was helpless and unknown. It might have lain there another twenty years. But I discovered it, and made it give up its treasure. You are like that bottle. A week ago you were unknown. You have been discovered. Who has done it I cannot say, but I feel in my bones that everything is right—that you are on the threshold of great adventures—that all will be well. Come, pass your glass, and then go home and sleep soundly. The man who cannot take comfort from this does not deserve to be alive."

The look of doubt and worry went from Hector's face. He laughed and held forth his glass.

"The parable is good," he said. "From now onwards I will believe absolutely. You have cured me—swept away my last doubts."

"Not I, but the wine," said the Doctor modestly.

"Some people found a family. I founded a wine cellar. It has never disappointed me. And my good Hector—you will be like me. Apparently the ladies do not tempt you. You live in seclusion with your books and your dreams. Has your heart never beaten to the flash of a pair of beautiful eyes? I believe there are very few like you in all France. I, when I was young : . . The old student days in Paris. But never mind. That is long ago." And the Doctor laughed heartily.

Hector flushed a little.

"It is true. I have only had one mistress—literature. Does that sound foolish? I will confess to you, Doctor. There have been beautiful women in my dreams. But I have not seen them in St. Médard. Here I am a barber. . . . Ah, but I cannot tell you. It is too difficult."

"You seek the ideal, and it is not to be found. And in the meantime you remain *sage* and refuse to be tempted by anything more gross, more ordinary. Eh? Is it not so?"

"Perhaps. You understand our minds, Doctor, as well as our bodies."

"And when you go to Paris," went on the Doctor, looking over the top of his wineglass, "you will meet your ideal. I feel it. You are right. You will never meet your soul's mate in St. Médard. You were never made to be a comfortable little bourgeois. In spite of the scissors and the razor a poet's heart beats within you. But if a man cannot find his ideal in Paris, *que diable*, why then he must be made of wood!"

Hector left the Doctor's in a glow of content and happiness, thanking Fortune that he had such a friend. The old town was quiet and deserted as he walked back to his home. It was nearly midnight—very late for St. Médard. The Café du Commerce was just shutting up.

He had spent all his life here. His father had been a modest functionary in the *Octroi*. Out of his savings—

and how he must have saved to have done it!—he had bought the hairdressing business in the narrow Grande Rue. Duval *père* apparently thought he was doing very well for his son. And he had a way with him which would not be denied when he had made up his mind to a thing.

“You will be your own master,” he had said. “It is a great thing to have no *patron* to bother about.”

His mother had been by no means so sure about it. She had rather timidly tried to suggest that there ought to be something better in life for this tall son of hers, who seemed to derive all his distinction from her. It certainly did not come from the comfortable, stocky figure of his father.

But the father was inflexible, and strangely enough Mme. Duval was acquiescent in all such matters. Duval *père* was not an indulgent father, but he was just. He showed an unvarying mixture of kindness and severity; as of one who would have liked to be fond, but who constantly restrained himself from any open display of warm feeling. Often he looked at his tall son with a sort of brooding wistfulness, as though he would have liked to expand, but could not.

As for Hector he had recoiled from the first from the idea of being a barber. Something mysterious but powerful within him seemed to cry out against the idea. His mother, he knew, felt as he did. But there was only one law in their little household, and it never occurred to Hector that he owed his father anything less than complete obedience. So he had entered the establishment which later he was to own. Then had come his period of Army service, which in some ways he was sorry to leave behind him. A little later he had been installed as proprietor of the business.

“You will not be a little functionary, dependent on the whims of other functionaries a little bigger, as I have

been," said his father. "You will be able to do as you please, and if some day politics interest you, you will be able to think and say what you please. You are independent of all the world. Be thankful."

Sometimes when his father talked in that strain it would seem that he cherished some sort of obscure grudge against the world. And yet life on the whole seemed to have treated him very well. He had been able to save money, without too much strain. The Duval household had always been comfortable. Fate had given him a submissive and comely wife; too submissive, Hector sometimes felt, and too old for her years. As he grew up he realized that his mother must have been very pretty when young.

Often he had tried to make her talk of her days in Paris, when she was in attendance on some of the great ladies of the fashionable world. But she was curiously vague about that period of her life. She did not seem able to make it live for him. Perhaps that was his father's influence. Duval *père* did not seem to approve of Paris, or the fact that his wife had once lived there. There were times when he seemed almost to hate Paris, which was absurd.

All things considered Hector began to come to the conclusion that his father had taken much too sombre a view of life. He found it necessary to suppress a growing feeling that Duval *père* was not grateful enough for what life had brought him. Ease, and a wife such as he had! But as he grew up to manhood Hector realized that he simply could not understand his father. There was a great division between them; nothing of any kind seemed to belong to both of them. There were moments when the distressing thought would intrude that the father was in no way worthy of either the mother or the son.

No other father, for instance, would have made a barber of such a son!

He hated these thoughts, and suppressed them as resolutely as possible. His future, his part in life, was traced out for him, and he must accept it.

That was all years and years ago, belonging, as it seemed, to remote times, and Duval *père* and *mère* had gone long since. His mother had died first. Often, looking back, Hector had felt that there seemed no great reason why she should have gone. It was as though she had merely faded out. His father had followed her within two years—a difficult period. He seemed to droop. He galloped into old age, and seemed to welcome it, and its climax.

“Thou hast been a good son,” he said towards the end, as though it had occurred to him for the first time.

Hector tried to revere the memory of his father, but found it difficult. As the years passed it seemed as though a stranger had all his life been living with them. The son and the mother were one. The father was apart. Hector came to the conclusion that in its quiet way her life had been something of a tragedy. She had made a spiritual *mésalliance*.

She ought to have married some other kind of man.

Many a time he found himself wondering what kind of man. Some sort of image of what his mother’s husband ought to have been was often in his mind, but he could never quite seize it. It was mixed up in some odd way with his passionate dislike of the trade to which his father had put him.

He upbraided himself for such imaginings; told himself that they were unworthy and cruel and, worse than that, ridiculous. There was some romantic nonsense within him which ought to be sternly eradicated. But though he told himself these things they did not convince him. That mysterious strain of romantic dissatisfaction was often more powerful than the sober common sense of one who had been ordained to pursue one of life’s most

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hum-drum occupations. The poet and dreamer within was ever at war with the servant of the public who trimmed hair and beards.

But however such daydreams might honour his mother they were—he told himself—an unjust reproach to his father who, according to his lights, had done his best.

He was a barber, and must remain content to be one.

Or so he assured himself until the arrival of that amazing day when he read that Paris was talking about him.

II

The shop was dark as Hector let himself in, returning from Dr. Lemoine's with the glow of that old vintage still within him and, what was more, the comforting philosophy of his friend.

He passed quickly through the shop to his rooms above, where he lived alone. There was electric light, and as he switched it on it revealed a roomy, low-ceilinged apartment, overlooking the street.

Here lived another Hector Duval, far removed from the one who worked in the barber's shop down below. It was one of the thoughts most familiar and constant to him—that he had for so long lived a double life. Below he was the barber, the servant of the famous *clientèle*, or of anybody else who might like to intrude into his shop, and saved only from the obsequiousness inevitable to his trade—or so he had dared to think—by his own natural dignity.

But here, among the books that covered most of the walls, he could be himself. Was himself. Very few people in St. Médard had visited Hector at home. The chief exception, apart from Dr. Lemoine, was M. Mercier, the grocer from almost opposite, who had shown himself very pressing and had often enough sat there, smoking his pipe, and making rather banal conversation.

until that consummation arrived she was the victim of the aura of romance that surrounded him, and would have given much to know whether he was shy or—terrible thought—indifferent!

III

Dr. Lemoine was the only really welcome visitor in that upper room. And though downstairs he presented his trim white beard for expert attention twice a week, up in Hector's retreat he sat on equal terms—one well-read man talking to another, no more and no less.

Hector, sensitive to a high degree, was deeply appreciative of the harmony and naturalness of their relations. It was not so with any others of the *clientèle*. Behind their bluff heartiness and friendly familiarity there was usually a hint of patronage, which made closer intimacy with them impossible to him. He cursed himself sometimes for what he called his ferocious sensitiveness, but there it was. In any case few if any of them could have talked about the things that interested the Doctor and himself.

But on this night, after leaving his friend, he felt none of the unhappy dissatisfactions of the past. Everything seemed *couleur de rose*. He felt, with the Doctor, that he was on the threshold of a great and glorious change in life. It was not merely the effect of that wonderful wine, or of the Doctor's striking parable. The miracle had happened—or was about to happen—and all the doubts and apprehensions and bedevilments of the past few days had evaporated. He felt, as he fell happily asleep, that the chains had fallen from him, that soon he would be himself, for ever done with St. Médard and the *clientèle*.

Mlle. Henriette Mercier, as she lay a few yards away revolving in her mind what was the best way to treat a husband once he had been secured; thinking also of the

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extraordinary references to Hector in the Paris newspapers which had been lengthily discussed in the family, and wondering what they would mean to him; would no doubt have been dismayed, and certainly indignant, if she could have realized how wholly free of her were her romantic neighbour's thoughts.

CHAPTER III

I

Two days later there arrived at the shop a distinguished looking letter with the Paris postmark, bearing the amazing superscription of "Monsieur Hector Duval, Coiffeur, Poet and Dramatic Author, Grande Rue 19, St Medard."

The narrow Grande Rue outside was just awakening to its morning activities as the postman handed Hector the letter. His own shop was set for the day's business, everything spick and span, its mirrors and coloured bottles, its taps and basins all polished and spotless. It was all that a barber's shop should be—and Hector found himself looking at a letter which reminded him that he was also a poet and a dramatic author.

He stared at it for an appreciable time before opening it. Its contents were just as startling. He looked at the end of the letter first, to see from whom it came, and stared in amazement to see that it was signed by Roger de Bac, and Pierre Dufayel, those two very famous collaborators in Palais Royal farces, whose names for decades past had never been mentioned separately.

Then he read it.

They announced that on behalf of a committee of fellow authors they had the agreeable task of inviting M. Hector Duval to be the guest at a banquet to be given in his honour at the Café de Paris on that day week.

The occasion, they explained, was part of a movement which had for its object the recognition of workers in the various arts, with particular attention to the more remote regions of France, who had not as yet had the good fortune to make a definite impression on the world at large. They would be obliged if he could write to them by return saying that he would be able to honour them with his company, in which case they would be happy to send him further details.

Assuring him of their profoundest respect and admiration they begged to remain his devoted servants and *confrères*.

Hector re-read the letter as he had re-read that first paragraph. But this did not leave him bewildered. This was light breaking in. Here was the key to the mystery. No longer was he the sport of the unknown. The names of de Bac and Dufayel were as familiar to him as his own. Theirs was the most famous literary partnership of its kind that Paris had known for years past.

Here was news. News at last. He felt as though the sun was shining on him. Paris! Dufayel and de Bac! The Café de Paris!

And the generosity, the large-heartedness of it. To ask him, the unknown poet of a little hole in the provinces, to meet the great and splendid ones of Paris! What a magnificent place the world was, and how noble the people in it!

"Read that, Paillasse," he exclaimed, and thrust the letter towards his chief assistant.

He must tell the Doctor about this at once. It could not wait. Perhaps he would be able to catch him before he went out on his rounds. Already he was taking off his white jacket and his apron.

"This is splendid," said Paillasse, still holding the letter but looking as though he did not quite understand

what it was all about. "A banquet, eh! Who are these gentlemen?"

"De Bac and Dufayel!" cried Hector. "You have never heard of them! My good Paillasse, they are famous. They are great authors—dramatic authors. There is nobody else like them in Paris. Look after the shop. I'm going out to see Dr. Lemoine." And he rushed upstairs for his clothes.

It was strange, as he stepped out into the street, to be dressed like ordinary men at that time of day and to be leaving his shop behind him. That mere step seemed enormously to have transformed things. It was a beginning of liberty. He felt as though wings were attached to him.

As fortune would have it he had not walked for more than a few minutes through the streets, saluting acquaintances here and there who he felt must be mildly surprised to see him abroad at such an hour, when he saw the Doctor being driven along in his ancient green motor-car.

Hector hailed him excitedly and waved the letter. Pierre, who had years before been the Doctor's coachman, pulled up.

"News!" cried Hector breathlessly, as he arrived at the Doctor's side, and thrust the letter at him.

Dr. Lemoine took the letter, laid it on his knee, produced his spectacles, put the case back in his pocket, fitted the spectacles to his nose, examined the envelope with some attention, frowned slightly at it, took out the letter, and at last read it. He then started at the beginning once more and read it again.

"Well?" cried Hector, dancing.

"As you say, it is news. Great news." He proceeded, inversely, through all the actions he had previously performed, finally handing the letter back to Hector. He appeared to be pondering.

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"De Bac and Dufayel," he said. "A famous couple. Yes, that settles it. And so you will go to Paris next week, to be fêted. Wonderful."

Hector nodded, his face radiant. The Doctor held out his hand, and they exchanged a hearty grip.

"You are to be congratulated, my dear Hector. There can be no doubts now. If you like we will write that letter together this evening."

"I could desire nothing better," said Hector, his heart full of gratitude to all humanity.

"We will do it over another bottle of that Chamber-tin," said the Doctor. "It brings us luck. Come and see me at eight."

He drove on, shedding benevolence. And Hector continued the way he had come. He felt he wanted to walk for miles and miles, to be by himself, to feel the spaces of the countryside. He was free. The shop could do without him for that day. Perhaps for ever!

II

Two days later a further letter arrived from MM. De Bac and Dufayel. It asked Hector to be good enough to descend at the Grand Hotel on his arrival in Paris, where they would be happy to wait upon him, and conduct him to the banquet.

From then onwards to the day of his départure Hector lived in a dream. The *Dépêche* devoted a long article to the coming celebration and reprinted several of Hector's poems—"verses which we are proud to say were first published in these columns." He studied time-tables, and discussed with the Doctor whether he should arrive in Paris with a day to spare, so as to allow time for his

nerves to settle down before the banquet, or whether he should plunge right in.

Congratulations poured in upon him. There were times when he seemed to be holding a reception in his shop. The *clientèle* showed by many subtle touches that Hector had become almost one of them. The Mayor called to assure him, personally and officially, of his warm appreciation of the honour which had befallen Hector and the town. The climax came when it was imparted to him that before his departure the *Cercle de l'Union* proposed to hold a reception in his honour; a *punch d'honneur*.

It all seemed to pass as in a dream—the trying on of his new dress suit; the instructions to Paillasse; a meeting with Henriette in the street in which, as she congratulated him and expressed the hope that he would not forget his old friends when away in Paris, he felt that his whole existence trembled in the balance; many conversations with the Doctor.

“You must take your plays with you,” said his friend. “You never know.”

Hector promised that he would.

Then the evening when, supported by his good friend, he crossed for the first time the sacred threshold of the club. He was not wearing his dress clothes. St. Médard did not expect that. But his dark suit was new, and became him well. He also wore a silk hat, which caused him some uneasiness.

“Be comforted,” said the Doctor. “When the ladies of Paris see you in those clothes they will open their eyes. To-night will be a rehearsal for your great night in Paris to-morrow.”

To Hector it seemed a majestic occasion. There crept into him the conviction that for the first time in his life he was in company that was worthy of him. Life even in St. Médard, apparently, could be very good.

The great event of the evening was the speech by Dr. Lemoine.

"Our distinguished young friend," he concluded, "is departing in the bright dawn of his twenty-eighth year to receive the homage of literary Paris. It is an invitation to Parnassus, where Apollo and the Muses will wait upon him to do him honour. The warmest wishes and congratulations of St. Médard go with him."

He added amid generous applause that he would go too, but that his professional duties made it impossible.

Hector found himself in the card-room of the club, the centre of an ever-shifting group, talking and laughing, the restraint of years cast away.

A cigar of fine aroma smouldered between his fingers. He felt the glory of power and success; of being an equal among the best of mankind; savoured the luxury of fine surroundings and distinguished company. He had never realized before of what fine fellows the *clientèle* consisted. This was the summit of life.

And yet on the morrow he would have mounted to unbelievably greater heights. This was St. Médard. And to-morrow it would be Paris!

M. Passy, the editor of the *Dépêche*, was one of the many who approached him. He demanded that Hector should send from Paris, or bring back with him, a full account of the proceedings at the banquet.

"Will it not be a little difficult to do that?" Hector demurred at first. "How can I write about something which is to be—pardon me for saying it—in my honour?"

"St. Médard will expect it," said M. Passy majestically. "Remember that it was in the *Dépêche* that our poet was born."

"That is true," said Hector, still a little doubtfully.

"You write as much as you can, with all the names

you can possibly get, and leave the rest to me," said M. Passy. "It will not appear that you have had any hand in it."

Hector thanked him for this, and promised that he would do what was asked of him.

"But remember—names," repeated M. Passy. "Should it ever be your good fortune, my dear Hector, to engage in literature as a profession—and who can say what will not come of this wonderful experience?—never forget the importance of names in any article you may write. Even in our Republican France, people still love to read of imposing names."

Hector promised that he would not forget, should such fortune come his way.

There was no formal leave-taking as he left the club, to drive in the Doctor's car to his rooms, before going on to the train. It was intimated to him that the moment for that would be at the railway station. "A few friends" would be there, he was told.

But when he arrived on the platform, carrying his bag in which were his precious unacted plays, he was quite taken aback at the sight that awaited him.

"The few friends," in spite of the lateness of the hour, seemed to be all St. Médard. The Mayor was there, wearing his official tricolour sash. There were also M. Maujis, the Sous-Préfet, the members of the *cercle*, a large gathering of the general public and the town band. Sensational events were rare in St. Médard, and the most had been made of this one.

There were handshakes, speeches, general enthusiasm and the final exhortations of the Doctor. Hector found himself surrounded, buffeted, clapped on the back, his hand seized by this person and that and shaken continuously. It was bewildering. It was too much. With the excitement at its height the train rolled in.

The unbelievable moment came when Hector, looking

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down from the carriage window, saw the notables of the town, the *clientèle*, everybody, with hats upraised, all looking and shouting at him, and realized with intense emotion that he was rolling out of the station to the strains of the *Marseillaise*.

CHAPTER IV

MM. DE BAC and Dufayel arrived at the Grand Hotel at about half-past five in the evening, sent up their cards, and sat down to wait in the *salon*.

These two brothers of the pen were singularly alike. Both slim and dark, they radiated elegance. They were seen everywhere where fashion and distinction congregated. They had long ago and often been caricatured by Sem, which was a sort of fame in itself. There was, apparently, not an atom of social difference between them. And yet Dufayel was the son of a modest café proprietor, and de Bac was of the authentic *noblesse*. They had gone to the same lycée, studied together in the Latin Quarter, engaged in the same follies, and emerged triumphantly as an inseparable and powerful combination.

It was generally believed that Dufayel supplied the ideas for their constant flow of work for the theatres, and that de Bac applied the decoration. But this was merely surmise. All that they condescended to let the world know was that they were under a mutual vow to abstain from marriage, as such a step would inevitably impair their precious collaboration. Any other, and less serious adventure, with the fair sex did not come within the terms of this agreement.

"Twins, by the same Mother Country," as somebody had described them perfectly.

For two inseparables who were engaged on an errand of goodwill they did not now look too happy as they waited in the *salon*.

"I wonder how he will take it, after all?" said de Bac, looking at his companion a little nervously.

"One can always arrange these affairs afterwards, whatever happens," replied Dufayel.

They became aware that standing in the door of the *salon* was a tall young man, with a blonde Vandyke beard. An impressive young man, even though his dark clothes did not quite bear the stamp of the capital. A servant of the hotel who was with him indicated the two callers.

Hector advanced towards them, a nervous flush on his face, his hand timidly outstretched.

"Messieurs de Bac and Dufayel?" he said.

They bowed.

"Monsieur Hector Duval?"

"Messieurs, how can I begin to thank you for the great honour . . . ?" he began.

The conversation was very brief, and the two elegant Parisians seemed almost as nervous as their country visitor. Hector mentioned as an aid to conversation that he had brought certain manuscripts of the theatre with him, and they replied politely that they hoped to have the great pleasure of reading them. It was arranged that Hector should be at the Café de Paris shortly before eight o'clock, and on that the two took leave of him.

"My God!" exclaimed de Bac as they found themselves outside on the boulevard again.

"What?" queried Dufayel, though quite well aware of why it was said.

"He doesn't much suggest the barber who writes doggerel poetry after all. I wonder if our friend Fleury did a very good thing in discovering him?" And de Bac tugged nervously at his trim moustache.

"It's too late now to begin to worry about it," replied

Dufayel. "We must be gay. The others are expecting to be. You look depressed, *mon ami*. Let us drop in at the Venise and talk to somebody."

They walked to their favourite café, wondering.

II

Left to himself Hector returned to his room, a prey to excitement and nervousness, and began to dress with great care. That done, and after having surveyed himself in the glass a score of times, he found that he had an hour to spare, and decided to go out and discover Paris.

He found himself on the Grands Boulevards at the apéritif hour, and the brilliance and animation of the scene overwhelmed him.

The reality was far more wonderful than all his dreams of the capital. The flashing lights; the never-ending roll of traffic; the amazing, cosmopolitan crowds, through which he had almost to shoulder his way; the beautifully dressed and pretty women; the many cafés with their multitudes of people at tables, inside and out; the hoarse cries of the *camelots*, raucous as crows, rushing along with the evening papers—all this thrilled and intoxicated him to an intense degree. He suddenly felt tremendously proud to be a Frenchman, and glowed with the desire to do something great—to be somebody in this wonderful Paris.

If the impossible could happen, and he could leave St. Médard and his shop behind him to come to work here! If he could become the intimate of such wonderful men as those two who had just left him! Dreams.

Yet the whole circumstances of his call to Paris were so amazing that he felt anything might happen.

"It is like the Thousand and One Nights," he murmured as he walked along. "Aladdin rubbed his

lamp, and here I am." But he tried to put from his mind the thought of the ordeal that was soon to come.

He stopped a flying *camelot* in his rush, bought a copy of *La Liberté*, and sitting down at a café table found it an exquisite sensation to glance through his first Paris newspaper bought in Paris. He belonged to the wider world at last.

But it was time to pull himself together—to nerve himself to face that gathering of the great the thought of which filled him with something of intoxication and something of terror.

He inquired his way to the Café de Paris, and suppressing the desire to flee, now that the moment had come, gave his name, as he had been told to do, to a gorgeously attired attendant at the entrance to the private rooms. He was relieved of his hat and coat and found himself in a thickly carpeted corridor where, to his great relief, de Bac and Dufayel advanced to meet him, impressive in their perfectly cut evening dress—the twin genii of the Lamp, as they seemed to him.

They escorted him to a reception-room blazing with lights where, moving and speaking as if in a trance, he shook hands with many elegant and distinguished-looking people. There were a number of women, dazzlingly arrayed, among the guests, but his nervousness had too utterly overwhelmed him already for him to feel much further discomfort at this. The guests, all chatting together so that their voices made a harmonious babel, and with the musical laughter of the women ringing out clear above the rest, moved slowly to a large room, where a long table was glitteringly set for a banquet.

He felt stunned. Surely there was some mistake. This could not all be for him!

There was some hesitation and re-shuffling before everybody found seats. Near him he heard somebody say:

"Will you sit there? Next to him."

He heard a woman's voice reply :

"Very well. If you wish it."

It was a pleasant and musical voice. But it was as though the woman who had replied had conceded something in being near to him. As though a certain resolution had been needed.

He found himself seated with Dutayel on one side of him, and on the other the bewitching owner of this voice.

In the one timid glance he dared to steal at her profile, with its crown of hair like burnished copper, it seemed to him that her face was familiar. But he was too disturbed to think the matter out. He had never in all his life met a woman like this. She was a creature of a kind unknown to him. It thrilled him to feel her near him, but frightened him too.

With his mind still filled with the bright picture of the Boulevards he could yet marvel at the brilliant setting in which he now found himself; the long table, with its sparkling glass and gay flowers; the dark crimson decoration of the room, with concealed electric lights glowing softly; and above all at the people round the table.

They too were of a kind he had never met before; the half-dozen women who were of the company richly gowned, their white throats and arms gleaming, and with the delicate air of the *chic* Parisienne radiating from them bright as sunlight; the men, most of them fairly young, as he noticed, clever looking and elegant, some of them perhaps even a trifle dissipated. But that was perhaps natural, in Paris, he reflected, particularly among such distinguished people.

For a moment he contrasted it all with the dinner at the *cercle* the night before; that modest country bourgeois gathering which up to then had been the grandest moment of his life—and then, ages and ages ago, as it seemed, with his life in the barber's shop. He wished ardently

that he could find something more to say to his fair neighbour.

"Who is she?" he whispered to Dufayel.

"You do not know?" returned Dufayel, showing surprise even in his whisper. "That is Lina Bernay."

"*Mon Dieu!*" murmured Hector—so fervently that Dufayel laughed.

Of course he should have recognized her. Lina Bernay, the star of the Etoile Theatre, perhaps the most popular actress in all Paris! And to think that he was sitting beside her—that she was one of the company who had come to honour him!

Dufayel, as if awakening to his duties as host, began to describe the company, some twenty-five or thirty in all. There was Latouche, the famous dramatic critic, whose weekly *feuilleton* in that bright and reckless style which had already brought him half a dozen duels, was read by a million in *La Petite Presse*; Féraudy, of *Le Jour*, who had kindly put in the famous paragraphs; Arnaud, who, luckily for him, was rich enough to pay for the production of his own plays; Lepelletier, the well-known theatrical manager; Lhermite, a rising poet, much beloved by society ladies; Julien, who ran a fashionable cabaret at Montmartre; Sarcey, famous for his comic parts at the Boulevard theatres, and so on. A glittering constellation indeed!

All the women present were of the theatre world. Hector recognized some of the names as Dufayel indicated them. He wanted to ask how it was that he had been discovered and asked to come amongst them; but hesitated how to frame the question, and it went unasked.

Dufayel was drinking champagne rapidly, and saw to it that Hector's glass was kept full, insisting that it was necessary to make the occasion a festive one. Hector did not resist, especially as the company generally seemed to be doing the same. There was evidently a very good joke

going on at one end of the table, judging by the frequent bursts of laughter. He occasionally caught glances directed towards him, and though he did not know what the fun was about he allowed the gaiety of the others to infect him, and gradually the champagne conquered his nervousness.

This was Life at last, he told himself.

He thrilled to hear his fair neighbour address him, and turned to her with what boldness he could command.

"I understand," she said, "that this is your first visit to Paris."

Simple words, but he felt that they were the most wonderful he had ever heard. She had spoken to him! He plunged in, and found himself talking rapidly to her, revelling in the fact that he was *tête-à-tête* with so glorious a creature.

Something the Doctor had said came into his mind:

"If a man can't find his ideal in Paris he must be made of wood."

Here was an ideal for any man. But what an absurd notion for him to entertain. . . . Champagne!

Yet he felt a sort of recklessness gain him as they talked. This was a moment that would never be repeated in his life. He would make the most of it.

Her eyes were a wonderful violet, he noticed, as they sat half turned to each other. He became dimly aware that some of the company farthest removed from them were growing a little boisterous. But that no doubt was natural on such an occasion as this.

His own restraint completely vanished, and he told her of the wonder of his visit to Paris; described with no sense of embarrassment his life as a barber and his dreams of a literary career; contrasted the dull existence of the provinces with the surroundings in which he now found himself.

He did not talk like a country barber any more than he looked like one, and she began to regard him with an

awakening and sympathetic interest, smiling gently at his enthusiastic description of his first promenade on the Boulevards.

"You make us of Paris realize how much we take for granted," she said.

He found himself trembling a little as she looked at him with that sympathetic, questioning and slightly perplexed air, her eyebrows a little raised, which his talk about himself seemed to have raised in her.

"When I look at you and the people round this table," he said feverishly, "I ask myself if I am not simply passing through a glorious dream, and I dread the grey awakening."

Another expression came into those eyes, which had seemed so softly sympathetic to all he had been saying. The light went out of them. She flushed, and turned quickly away. He wondered whether he had been too bold, and his exhilaration rushed out of him, leaving him confused. He wondered what he could say to show her that he had merely let his ardent appreciation of such a wonderful occasion—of the amazing fact, above all, that he had been privileged to talk to her—run away a little with his discretion.

CHAPTER V

At that moment a sharp rapping on the table rose above the buzz of conversation and laughter, and looking up with some apprehension he saw de Bac rise to his feet. There was an instant silence as de Bac started to speak, and in that sudden calm Hector felt terribly alone and apprehensive.

They were united there that evening, de Bac began, to honour a brother worker in the field of literature, whose genius, although perhaps it was not yet appreciated by that larger public which, alas! must be conquered before the artist could gather the fruits of his labours, had already made its appeal to some of those in Paris who were proud to be humble followers of the arts which their guest ennobled and dignified.

A chorus of noisy applause greeted the conclusion of the flowing period, and Hector's face sank lower and lower to the table. De Bac had screwed a monocle into his eye, and as he continued to heap one extravagant compliment on another, his speech punctuated by frequent and noisy acclamation, there was a jaunty ring, a suggestion of *blague*, in his voice which might have warned Hector had he not been so busily occupied in trying to think what he was going to say in reply. But he started to hear de Bac declaim :

"As a hairdresser our guest was known only to one of us, who recently passed through St. Médard, and had the privilege of being shaved in an establishment which hence-

forth must be famous. But as a man of letters our guest is known to us all, and I am able to make the startling announcement that he whom we are met to honour to-night brought with him in his travelling bag a number of manuscripts which the literary world has yet to acclaim. And what may not these unknown masterpieces have yet to reveal to us of the unplumbed depths of genius in our friend and guest? I raise my glass, then, not to Monsieur Hector Duval, the barber, but to Monsieur Hector Duvál, poet and dramatist!"

There was a laughing roar of applause as the company rose to their feet, a few of them rather unsteadily, with glasses raised on high. The cheering went on for a minute or more, with Hector's head still bowed to the table, and he did not see that some of his hosts were laughing uproariously as they shouted, or that his fair neighbour, with deadly pale face and lips that she was constantly moistening, shared neither in the applause nor the merriment.

Then silence came. Dufayel touched his arm. Hector realized that the great moment had come when he must speak. He raised his flushed face from the table and stood up, his eyes shining.

Their eyes were bent with the intensest curiosity on him as he rose; on what had been represented to them as a droll combination of country barber and scribbler, who was mad enough to believe that Paris was really acclaiming him. It was true that he was not the comic figure that had been promised. The idea had been spread that he was a droll in every way, and the first sight of him had been a disappointment. But now, no doubt, he was about to reveal himself in all his stark folly and egotism, and the silence was profound as the circle of eager faces waited for the first words to fall from him; a silence that some only succeeded in maintaining by the exercise of great self-control, so convinced had they been in advance that

this barber-poet, rushing up from the provinces to listen to words of mock acclamation, was a figure of fun.

"Mesdames, Messieurs," Hector murmured, very faintly, as if strangled, and stopped.

From one end of the table came a suppressed gurgle, which instantly resolved itself into a fit of coughing. The noise of the coughing seemed to steady the speaker. He saw the faces through a faint, bluish haze of smoke that hung lazily over the table and, consumed by emotion, struggled to frame sentences that should express the gratitude that overwhelmed him. He thought of the verses he had written in the silence of the room over his shop. If only he could speak now as he had written then.

"Mesdames, Messieurs," he began again. And suddenly the thought of St. Médard came into his head, and all that was expected of him, and his voice rang out startlingly clear and confident:

"You will, I know, have every indulgence with me. I have already had such splendid proofs of your generosity that I know you will overlook the imperfections of my poor discourse. I wish it could be such a glowing pæan of gratitude that every word should ring in your ears for ever as the cry of a soul in ecstasy."

Hector paused. His eyes were downcast, searching the table for inspiration. He did not see that many of the diners were looking at each other questioningly, a tinge of doubt mixed with their amusement.

He found to his joy that he was master of himself and the situation, that words and ideas were crowding on him, and that he had merely to express what he felt clearly within him. He looked up and spoke out boldly, breathlessly. The moment of ordeal had come, and he exulted to think that he was equal to it.

"You must know how impossible it is for me to give expression to the emotions that leap within me. My

words may seem flat and tame, but I would sweep you off your feet.

"You see me here in surroundings to which you are accustomed, and at this glittering banquet, where fair women shed the soft radiance of their presence, I alone of all of you am out of place. To you it is but in the natural order of things. But as for me—how can I hope to describe the new world in which I find myself?"

His eyes shone with exaltation, and words came tumbling to his lips.

"Yesterday I was yet living, a country barber, in a small country town. My eyes had never yet beheld the great world. I had never spoken with men who are famous, or sat with women who are the fairest. And to-night I am with you at this radiant fête; with you in this wonderful Paris, which to us Frenchmen of the distant countryside is a city far more wonderful and more fabulous than you who are of it can realize; a pole star to which we ever turn our eyes, hoping that some day we may reach there."

Something like a faint murmur of appreciation went round the table, and Hector, his eyes aflame, poured out his torrent of gratitude.

"And to-night I am in Paris, having just heard fall from the lips of one who is famous among you words that burn into my soul."

His burning, ecstatic gaze rested on de Bac, and de Bac looked hastily down at the tablecloth. There was a look of doubt, even bewilderment, on the faces of some of the company. The ladies looked inquiringly at their neighbours, as if for an explanation. Something was badly wrong. And Lina Bernay sat with her back turned to the speaker, not daring to look at him. She shuddered for the "grey awakening" that was to come. But somebody called out, "Continue, O my poet," and Hector, with a hasty glance in that direction, went on:

"You must not think that I accept blindly all that was

said about me by Monsieur de Bac. " True I had dreamed dreams. I told myself that what I had written had been worthy of writing. But how could I ever think that Fortune would make me one of her favoured ones; that those whom I regarded as belonging almost to another world would stretch out the hand of welcome and comradeship, and bid me come among them? And I stand before you exalted by the honour you have done me, and at the same time humbled to think that one who has done so little should receive so much. I, the barber of St. Médard, who . . . "

" But is he never going to finish with his explanations? " came a tipsy shout from the end of the table. " When is he going to be amusing, our barber? "

The interruption came from Lepelletier, a fat, clean-shaven man of fifty or so, who lay forward on the table smoking a cigar. The shout was followed by an outbreak of laughter from a few of those near him, who had been the noisiest section throughout the dinner, but from a number of other people round the table came a reproving " sh-h. "

" *Ah, non,* " protested Lepelletier at this. " This is a bit too much. "

He was obviously drunk, and with a profound seriousness which even under the circumstances had its humorous side, he turned to Julien to air his grievance.

" They invite us here to be amused, old friend, " he cried plaintively, " and it's all as serious and solemn as a political meeting. It is absurd! " And he gazed angrily at Hector, a man with a grievance.

Hector, bewildered, looked round the table, seeking to comprehend, and as his gaze swept round there were many who wished themselves well out of the whole business. Lepelletier was right. This barber was not at all the funny figure they were told they would meet, and even Lepelletier's comic grievance could set no laughter rolling

in face of the respect their guest had imposed on them. They had understood it was going to be a boisterous evening at the expense of a buffoon. But this barber was clearly not a fool, and looked and talked as if he might even be a poet.

Hector looked down to Dufayel for guidance, and that person, who was beginning to feel very uneasy in spite of the champagne, could only murmur: "Go on! It's all right. Lepelletier is drunk!"

From the other side of him came a fervent whisper from Lina Bernay. "Excellent! Keep it up!" She was beginning to hope that the sympathetic bearing of their victim would result in there being no joke at all.

But the incident, although it only lasted a moment, threw Hector into a confusion from which he could not recover. He tried to gather up the threads of his speech, but they were gone.

"Messieurs . . . frankly . . . all that I had intended to say has gone out of my head," he stammered. "But, believe me, whatever I had said, I could not possibly have expressed all that I feel towards you . . . my generous hosts to-night."

He sat down, feeling that he had made a hopeless fool of himself, and the faint and hesitating applause that came from one or two quarters confirmed this painful and humiliating impression. Had he but known it, a discomfort profound as his own hung over the company. For a few moments there was a terrible silence. Nobody knew what to do or say. The joke had gone hopelessly wrong. Dufayel looked hopelessly at de Bâc and Fleury, but they returned his blank gaze. And then Lina drew a deep breath of apprehension—of terror almost—as Lepelletier, who had been moving about restlessly, jumped to his feet.

"Mesdames, Messieurs," he cried boisterously, waving his cigar, "we cannot go on like this. For a company

of people who came out to amuse themselves never did I see such melancholy faces. I have been to jollier funerals! ”

One of those near him grabbed his coat tails, and tried to pull him down. But he struggled to keep on his feet, laughing.

“ It is a feast of undertakers,” he cried. “ This dolefulness must be swept away. And since our barber has failed us, and made a speech which was a model of seriousness, I propose that he should now recite to us some of his poetry! I have no doubt that will be much more amusing! ”

Lepelletier wound up with a happy roar of laughter, immensely tickled at his own jest. One or two near him joined in feebly, although the majority would willingly have clapped a hand over his mouth.

But the brutal joke was out at last, and Hector quivered as the words were uttered. The laugh that followed went through him like an electric shock. He looked round the table at the uneasy faces, and the truth burst upon him with blinding force. He rose heavily to his feet.

“ *Ah, mon Dieu!* ” he gasped. “ Then it was for that I was brought here—to amuse you! ”

His voice rose almost to a shriek as he looked wildly round, hoping for a contradiction to his words. But none came, although de Bac rose opposite to him to say weakly :

“ But listen, Monsieur Duval . . . ” Hector did not heed him.

“ You mock me! ” he shouted. “ You are all gathered here to make a fool, a tragic fool, of me! Deny it if you can! ”

He turned to Dufayel, whose back was turned towards him. His wild eyes turned to rest for a moment on Lina. She shrank away, not finding the courage to look at him—and regretted it bitterly for long afterwards.

“ You cannot. I see it in your faces! ” he cried hoarsely.

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He swayed for a moment, breathing heavily, his hand clutching his throat, his haggard gaze travelling up and down the table, like a hunted animal looking for a way of escape. And then his brain seemed to crumble away.

"You cowards!" he cried, and crashed heavily backwards to the floor.

•CHAPTER VI

I

THERE came a shriek from the women, and the men jumped out of their seats—sobered every one of them. Dufayel and one or two others tried to raise Hector, but he was inert and heavy. They propped him up in a sitting posture against the wall, and bathed his face with water from a carafe. The rest of the company stood helplessly in groups round the room. Someone went out to tell the *chasseur* to cycle off with all speed for a doctor.

AFTER a time Hector opened his eyes, and staring round stupidly and blankly for a time, suddenly remembered, and with a groan closed his eyes again, as if to shut out his shame. De Bac stood near, biting a cigar, and trying hard to maintain an appearance of calm, although the sight of the figure against the wall drove him to something like desperation. In a corner, pale and sober, Lepelletier was trying to combat the reproaches of two or three who surrounded him.

“It was a joke,” he protested. “Else what are we all here for? Answer me that?”

LINA Bernay stood apart, a figure of tragedy, overcome by shame and distress. Arnaud, who had been responsible for bringing her there, hurried up to her. She glared at him, her beautiful face transfigured.

“If I did not despise myself so much . . . oh, but it is abominable, abominable!” she burst out. “I had you

any idea that it was to be like this? I understood that he was to be an amusing buffoon to whom the joke would be nothing. Yet even that would have been no excuse . . .”

“Dear Lina, we are all as horrified as you,” Arnaud put in quickly. “It has all gone wrong. I wish to heaven I had never pressed you to come. I ask your pardon a thousand times.”

“I do not matter,” she replied, her hands clasped convulsively. “But I hate myself, I hate myself. His face will haunt me for ever. Why, *mon Dieu*,” her arm swept round with a superb gesture, indicating everybody in the room, “he is the best man of you all. And to think that women came here to laugh at him. What cruelty! He was right. Cowards, all of us.”

Arnaud looked very contrite. He stood before her like an abashed schoolboy. Her anger and contempt meant a lot to him.

“I am sorry, Lina, more sorry than I can say. Everything has gone wrong—horribly wrong. Let me take you away.”

“I am going because I cannot do anything, and because it will be worse for him if I stay. I have been cruel enough and will not add that insult. But I am going alone.” She flashed the words at him. “You must stay here and see if it is possible to do anything to repair the damage done to him—although from what I have seen of him I am afraid that is impossible. But he must be helped. Let me know as soon as you can what has happened. We must do all we can. And tell him, if you can, that I humbly beg his pardon.”

And with anger and pity and contempt contending fiercely within her she turned and was gone.

II

Arnaud returned to those who were chiefly responsible for the organization of the "joke"—Dufayel, de Bac and Fleury, who were gathered together as if seeking support among themselves. Fleury, who had "discovered" Hector when passing through St. Médard on a motoring trip, seemed ready to tear his hair. Not a trace of cynicism showed in any of them. The sudden collapse of their victim had left them for the moment without the power or the wish to gloss over matters.

"What's to be done, what's to be done?" Fleury kept on repeating. "The poor beggar has taken it like a thunderbolt. Something must be done!"

"We must do something, of course," said de Bac helplessly.

"I have an idea," went on Fleury. "Arnaud has influence in half the Ministries. He must get him some sort of a job under the Government, in Paris, or elsewhere. We can't send him back to his hairdresser's shop!"

Arnaud lit a cigarette from one of many tiny candles burning on the table.

"That may not be easy," he said. "But I will certainly do my best."

Many of the guests were now leaving quietly, glad to get away and leave the problem to the ringleaders. When a few minutes later Hector slowly stood up the company had been reduced to less than a dozen. All the women had gone.

De Bac and Dufayel went up to him at once.

"My friend," said de Bac, "you have let this little affair upset you far too much. It was not quite as you thought. We meant no harm."

"Come, be calm," put in Dufayel softly. "We will

make everything all right. You shall have nothing to regret."

Hector, his shirt crumpled, his long hair tousled, and his pointed beard dripping with the water sprinkled liberally on his face, pulled himself to his full height and glared down at them.

"Messieurs," he said, including the silent group behind them in a wave of his arm, "I would never have believed that France contained people so despicable . . . I salute you!"

He stalked towards the door, and Arnaud and Fleury stepped forward to intercept him.

"My friend, listen," cried Arnaud. "Let me explain."

"Away!" cried Hector, waving them aside violently, and they let him go.

He took his hat and coat without looking at the man who handed them to him, and stumbled down the stairs to the street. He was only just beginning to realize the full meaning of what had happened to him, the hopelessness of his situation. What an end, what a sorry end, to his dreams of the past weeks! What a fool! He ought to have listened to the voice of warning that had whispered to him—to have known that something evil inspired those mysterious paragraphs, even though all St. Médard believed in them.

Paris was just beginning to turn out of the theatres as he reached the Place de l'Opéra, and the Boulevards were again thronged. But he had no eyes for the passing show which had so entranced him a few hours before. He entered a café, ordered cognac, and tried to think calmly. His fierce anger helped him to combat the humiliation that overwhelmed him. But the thought that the beautiful woman who had talked with him so sympathetically was one of those who had come to ridicule him tortured him to the pitch of madness.

The pile of saucers on the little table before him had grown to half a dozen, and it was one o'clock before he left the cafe and inquired his way to his hotel. The man who took him up in the lift looked curiously at him, but Hector was unconscious of his gaze. In his room he threw himself on the bed, and his utter misery found vent in savage tears. His life had begun that day - and already its tragedy had arrived. He had been a dupe, a comic combination of hairdresser and poet, imported as the climax to a horrible practical joke - a cruel fate! He thought of the dinner at the *cercle* the night before, the ceremonious leave-taking at the station, his promise to write an account of the banquet! How could he ever face the ridicule, or the pity, that awaited him at St. Médard.

This vision—Dr. Lemoine and the rest—drove him to a frenzy of anguish. But more torturing even, and constantly recurring, was the thought that the woman he had talked with, who had seemed the very incarnation of all his dreams of fair women, had been one with his tormentors. The men he despised! Even in his misery and abasement he felt that he towered above them. He saw them now as he ought to have seen them before; a crew of elegant cowards and *farceurs* who had been guilty of the worst of all vices, cruelty. They were despicable. But that she should have been one of them tore his soul. Had she laughed too?

For a long time he lay there, a man drowning in despair. At last he rose heavily, and stood up. He stared vacantly at his terrifying reflection in the glass; his beard tangled; his hair awry, his face pale and haggard, his shirt front a ruin.

Then going to his bag he searched in it and found a razor; a large razor of the old fashioned type. He had little need of a razor himself, but it was natural to him always to have one with him. He opened it and looked at the keen, shining blade.

"The sign of my trade," he laughed to himself, in a voice that was a croak.

It seemed such a simple thing to do. He was not afraid of it. It was the best way out.

But even as he stroked the blade over the palm of his hand in a manner which, it bitterly occurred to him, was wholly professional, something restrained him.

To do it would be but to put the crown on the cruel scheme of his enemies. To sacrifice himself would be to complete their work. To them he was a barber who had played the fool for their amusement. Why should he now be a tragic fool?

He heard again the laugh of the fat man who had complained, while he was pouring out his soul in gratitude, that he was not amusing enough. What was it the drunken fool had said? That he had been to jollier funerals; that if the barber would only recite some of his poetry there would be something for the company to laugh about!

Hector's mouth tightened, and he drew a deep breath. The words and the scene were written on his brain. He shut his eyes, and could hear the very tones of Lepelletier, brutal and tipsy, ringing in his ears.

He shut up the razor with a click, and dropped it back into his bag. At least he would not be poltroon enough to die for a man such as that.

"Even a barber has the right to live," he murmured with a cynicism deliberately directed at himself.

The decision steadied him a little. The first thing necessary was to get away from a place cursed by such memories. The hotel itself was a mockery. It had seen the flowering of his ambitions—and their swift decay.

Feverishly he began to take off his dress clothes, hating each garment as he did so. Here was another mute reminder of his misery—the clothes made specially for the greatest of all days. They lay about his feet as he took

them off. He picked up the bundle and threw the lot into a far corner of the room. As a barber he would never need them again.

As he dressed again in the sober, dark clothes he had travelled in, his mind revolved ceaselessly round the tragically ridiculous position in which he was placed. He could never go back to St. Medard—that was certain. But everybody would be wondering what had happened to him in Paris. What could he tell them?

Perhaps he would write a letter to Dr. Lemoine telling him a little, but not too much. Or would it not be best simply to disappear and let the affair remain a mystery? This appealed more to him, and yet he hated the idea of leaving the excellent Doctor completely ignorant of what had happened to his *protégé*.

Then there was the shop. It would be easy to arrange that. He could write to M. Puy, the notary, and ask him to arrange the matter with Pullisac. It was a flourishing little business. Or he need not bother about it at all. What did anything matter?

As he thrust his various belongings into his bag he became aware of the manuscripts of his play lying at the bottom. There they were, neatly written out. What hopes he had had of them! His first impulse was to fall on them and destroy them—leave them lying in little pieces in that accursed bedroom. But another idea came to him. Why not send them to *her*?

Yes, he would do that. Send them to her, with just a line—“From one who hoped to one who inspired,” or “From one who was exalted and is now fallen.” Something dramatic. Something that would move her—perhaps even wound a little. And then she would perhaps see that although she had sat next to a barber he was not a fool. There was stuff there that even in his present abasement he felt was good.

When he thought of her the rest of that callous

assembly seemed to dwarf and shrink. Their laughter was the laughter of fools. God, how he despised them! But if only she could be brought to think differently.

He fastened his bag, took the key of the room and walked down the broad, quiet staircase. At the door there was some little trouble with the night porter on duty. Hector explained that he had only arrived the afternoon before. He put a note into the man's hand.

"That should be ample," he said. The porter consulted a book and immediately became affable. Should he search for a cab?

Hector shook his head and passed out. It was just after dawn, the sky a cold silver, and there was not a soul to be seen in the wide street. The air was chilly, and the great city seemed unfriendly, cold, hostile even. The contrast with the evening before; the crowds, the lights and his own excitement—all this brought back a rush of despair and bitterness which almost overwhelmed him.

He walked on down the wide avenue of the deserted Boulevards, his route of the evening before. They looked inexpressibly sad and tragic and empty under the cold grey sky. A solitary horse cab was trotting along. An *agent de police* stood at a corner, his arms tucked in under his long cape. The policeman turned to stare at the solitary wayfarer, carrying a bag and wearing a silk hat which hardly seemed suited to the time or the occasion.

And this was Paris! This cold, cruel city, where the solitary being in sight looked at him with suspicion! This the place of his dreams! Its silence, its hostile emptiness appalled him. Among all these sleeping millions who surrounded him there was not one soul that cared for his misery. St. Médard seemed to belong to another world. He felt terribly lonely and forlorn.

And then on the pavement he saw something that caused him to halt and stare. It was a poster on a kiosk, advertising Lina Bernay at the Etoile Theatre. It was a

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bold crayon design—an impressionistic thing of a few curved lines : just the eyes, the turn of her cheek, a cluster of hair and a smiling mouth. But it was amazingly like her. He thought of the real, living woman as he had sat with her, her head turned to his, looking at him as he talked of himself—radiant and wonderful. He caught his breath with a hoarse cry of pain.

• His bag in hand he stood staring at her.

CHAPTER VII

At nine o'clock that morning MM. Dufayel, de Bac, Arnaud and Fleury called at the hotel. They were in the nature of a deputation, come to offer what amends could be made.

They decided to go up unannounced, to avoid what they felt would be a refusal to receive them. At the bedroom door Dufayel knocked. There was a solemn and constrained air about the party, as if they were engaged on a very difficult errand. There was not the hint of a smile among them.

Dufayel repeated his knocking, but there was no reply. Again he knocked, and the room echoed hollowly.

The four looked at each other with uneasiness.

"Say, then," said Arnaud, "it does not sound good. I trust the poor devil has done nothing rash."

"Good God, no!" exclaimed de Bac. "It's impossible." But his pale face showed anxiety.

A chambermaid came along the corridor, attracted by the sound of knocking. They explained that they wished to call on a friend who had given no response to their knocking. Perhaps he was sound asleep.

The chambermaid hammered in turn, and the hearts of the four sank at the dolorous sound. It seemed to them to speak of tragedy.

"If he is in he must have heard that," the woman said briskly, and without another word slipped a key into the lock and opened the door. She looked in.

"It is empty, Messieurs. There is nobody here."

They crowded in after her, all relieved by the chambermaid's announcement.

"The poor devil's flown then," Dufayel murmured. "It might have been worse. Anything might have happened after that scene last night."

"Your friend has left some clothes behind," said the chambermaid, whose practised eye had been roving round the room. She went to a far corner, and picking up the clothes laid them out on the bed.

"But they are evening clothes, Messieurs—a complete suit, and new!" she went on. The woman's voice expressed her amazement that anybody could have left such valuable possessions behind.

The four men stood looking down at the dress-suit. The melancholy significance of it appealed to all of them. There was not a word as they looked. There was no need to say anything. Those new clothes, so soon discarded, were too eloquent in themselves.

De Bac spoke first. He turned to the chambermaid.

"Our friend apparently left in a great hurry," he said. "No doubt he forgot to pack these. Make them up into a parcel and leave them at the bureau in the name of Monsieur Hector Duval."

He gave her some silver, and the four left the room, with the woman's thanks following them.

"*Ah zut*, but this kind of farce ends badly," said de Bac, as they stood waiting at the lift. "The next time I have anything to do with one will be at the theatre, as usual."

CHAPTER VIII

I

MILLE. LINA BERNAY, of the Etoile Theatre, was universally accepted as one of the brightest stars of the lighter Parisian stage.

With still a comfortable period of time to elapse before she reached her thirtieth year her name in a modern comedy was one of the most powerful attractions of the Boulevards. Half the playwrights of the day dreamed of her as the ideal interpreter of their work. She inspired equally the successful man of letters and the aspiring youth dreaming of future literary glory in a garret of Montparnasse or Montmartre.

She had not arrived at her brilliant elevation in the world of the theatre without contact with the harsher realities of life. The peculiar circumstances of the tragic death of her husband in a motoring accident had profoundly moved artistic Paris at the time.

Lucien Delage was a leading *jeune premier* of the Paris theatres, and his good looks and attractive personality had always secured him a host of feminine admirers. He was susceptible enough to take full advantage of this adulation. But though his own adventures were legion he was almost insanely jealous of his beautiful and talented wife. Demanding the maximum of liberty for himself he was unwilling to concede the slightest degree of it to her. Though very talented he was vain, and lacked a sense

of proportion. Their married life had been much too tempestuous to be happy.

Such a situation would have been difficult even for a woman of merely average attainments and charm. But for Lina Bernay, herself subjected to much adulation, it was particularly so. She was denied any kind of satisfaction in life. The devotion of her husband—to whom she was sincerely attached—was of too explosive a kind to bring any happiness, even had he reserved all his attentions for her. On the other hand it was impossible for her entirely to avoid the attentions of others, but every friendship she had, apart from her husband, was threatened with dire and dreadful consequences. The threat of tragedy overhung every smile.

It was a situation too ridiculous to last, and Lina often used to wonder desperately what would be the outcome of it. She resented very keenly her husband's ferociously one-sided point of view, but knew that any decided step she might take towards a solution would precipitate disaster. Lucien, in his tempers, was always talking about revolvers, and she knew it was not idle talk. And if in his insane jealousy he had shot her, or somebody who was supposed to be her admirer, or even both, he would have run no particular risk. A Paris jury would have been kind to such a drama of jealousy and to such an assassin. Lucien no doubt would have wept bitterly during the trial, and might even have meant it. But he would have been in no danger.

Thus the dice were in every way loaded heavily against her, and her work suffered under the strain. There is a limit to how much even artists may thrive on being made miserable.

There was another respect in which her situation in this marital tangle was singularly disadvantageous. There was no other man to whom she wished to turn. There was no peace with Lucien. He would not dream of allowing

her to be alone. There was nobody with whom she felt it worth while to try to escape.

Arnaud, it is true, was as assiduous in his attentions as she would allow him to be. But that was not much. He was rich and had a passion for the theatre. But he roused no kind of emotion in Lina, although he had more than once caused it in Lucien. She regarded him as a fop, despite the undeniable fact that he would have been willing to take risks for her favours, or even the hope of them.

The world was full of men, and all men seemed to be alike in desiring her closer acquaintance. But there was none who could bring her happiness, or even peace.

II

Tragedy kindly solved her problem.

Lucien was paying a visit to Deauville and was there enjoying himself with his usual thoroughness, but always with a jealous ear turned to Paris. It was reported to him from Paris that during his absence Arnaud had been showing particular attention to his wife. Lucien sprang at once into his high-powered racing car, vowing immediate vengeance.

A telephone call came to Lina from Deauville, warning her. She had ample time to consider the situation. She sat in her flat, visualizing the car roaring along towards Paris, bearing her husband on his insane errand. He was a maniac for speed, and she knew that the headlong rush with which he drove his car would do nothing to allay the turbulence of his mood. Lucien at the wheel betrayed much of his true character. Man and machine were attuned in violence. As a very important detail Lina thought of the revolver in the pocket near the driving seat, with which Lucien always travelled.

She tried to warn Arnaud, but could not get into touch with him. The idea of communicating with the police came to her, but she dismissed it. This was her affair—hers and Lucien's. It would at any rate be the end, in one way or the other. If the coming encounter did not end in tragedy it would at any rate end her bondage to Lucien.

Hours passed, and the time came for her to leave for the theatre. As she played she expected at any moment to become aware of his irruption there. But still he did not arrive.

Late that night news of him came to Paris. Half-way on the road from Deauville a hay-cart had lurched across his track out of an unexpected turning, and Lucien Delage ended his absurd career against a tree, at a hundred kilometres an hour.

III

Lina was only human. It is true that the news of his death shocked her deeply. But even with the first onset of that emotion she was conscious of a considerable relief. If Lucien had not killed himself he would almost certainly have killed somebody else, probably herself.

Looking back, after the emotions of that day of waiting and climax had died down, she found that she was able to feel sorry for him. He had really, with all his advantages, been desperately unhappy. He was the victim of his temperament. He had been between the Devil and the deep sea. On the one hand his vanity and his susceptibility to feminine adulation. On the other his insane jealousy of the only woman of whom he was really fond. . . . But on the whole it was much better that the tree should have had the last word, and not the revolver.

For a time, following all this, she had renounced her

own career. Life had been too difficult. She needed peace. The only thing she was quite sure of in her own mind was that she wanted as little as possible to do with men.

But the call of her own talents and the insistence of managers proved in the end too strong to be resisted. The time came when as a relief from her memories she turned again gladly to her art, and was able to throw herself more ardently into it than ever before. Though she would not admit what more than one friend had pointed out to her, the release from a too-volcanic husband had enormously served her artistic progress. And quite as important as this, from her point of view, was the undoubted fact that the atmosphere of sentimental tragedy which his career and death had cast around her afforded her a great measure of protection in the following years. It was a barrier between her and the appetites of mankind.

It is against the social law that beautiful and accomplished *comédiennes* shall live alone in Paris. But for quite a long time Lina found it quite easy to live peacefully as a lamb surrounded by elegant wolves. She was able, by virtue of a tragedy which had given her freedom, to remain unusual in her own world. She knew it was only a truce, but she was clever enough to extend it to the maximum.

The time came when the memory of Lucien Delage served her no longer. She became aware that mankind was much more pressing in its attentions. The wolves, quite politely, were showing their teeth. Both from the right hand and the left there came pressing offers to share her existence. Lina thereupon announced that her experiences had made her a cynic with regard to men. The expedient gave her a further term of grace. But she was aware that the sands were running out; that the time was fast approaching when she might find it impossible to live any longer in defiance of the law of theatrical Paris,

which could not tolerate that one so charming should indefinitely live alone and unprotected.

And like Sister Anne on the tower she could see nobody coming; no man with whom she felt she could gladly link her fortunes with some hope of real happiness. She would have liked very much to be in love with somebody, but could see no prospect of it. It was an absurd situation for one who felt she had so much to give.

IV

Her very charming flat in the Avenue Friedland was the resort of many of the well-known personalities of artistic Paris. She might have presided over a real *salon* had she felt so inclined. And it was here one day that Arnaud—still one of her most assiduous admirers—had told her of a forthcoming event which was expected to provide much amusement to those concerned in it.

It appeared, said Arnaud, that their friend Fleury had discovered an extraordinary character somewhere down in the south. He was a barber, who thought that he was also a poet and a playwright. Fleury had seen him; had even been shaved by him.

Apparently, according to Fleury, he was a most amusing person—obviously he must be. Who ever heard of a poet and a playwright cutting hair for a living? And Arnaud, who thought more of his gifts as a dramatist than his friends did, laughed heartily at the idea.

Anyhow, a most amusing *farce* was being arranged. It was all to be done most artistically. The barber was to be brought up to Paris and fêted by the theatrical and literary world. Paragraphs were being inserted in various newspapers pretending that he was something wonderful as a writer, and that tardy honour was about to be paid to him. These would stimulate his vanity. Then the

invitation would be sent, the barber would come to Paris—and the fun would follow at the banquet in his honour.

“It hardly seems fair to the poor barber, does it?” Lina had said, at first not very much interested in the matter.

Arnaud waved this aside. It was to be an excellent joke—a very *chic* affair. Of course the barber might be a little put out when he found that the invitation to Paris was merely a joke. But that was a matter that would easily be arranged.

And Lina must come, he insisted. They were all relying on her brilliant presence to give a special *éclat* to the fête. There would be other well-known women there—he rattled off their names—but Lina was particularly counted on. The play she was in was nearing its end. She could easily take a night away from it.

By common consent the figure of Hector Duval, the barber-poet, was accepted as being full of the comic element. Nobody knew why, but the incongruous combination of barber and poet suggested a vain and vulgar little man. It was accepted that he must be a droll; a funny little fellow who would make everybody laugh at his quaint conceit that Paris was *fêting* his absurd person. He was judged in advance. A man so naturally comic as that fully deserved to be made the occasion of a delicate *farce*.

It was in this mood that Lina, after much pressing, unwillingly consented to make one of the gathering. She had no doubt that she was going to take part in a merry evening in which everybody, even including the quaint victim, would be vastly entertained.

Her first douche of disillusion came when, immediately before the banquet, the company met the victim and she saw to her amazement a tall young man, with well-cut mobile features, highly intelligent eyes and a blonde

Vandyke beard. She tried to escape, but it was too late. The ordeal of sitting next to him at dinner while gradually he came out of his provincial shell and revealed himself for what he was, affected her deeply. She was overwhelmed by the senseless and vulgar cruelty of the whole proceeding. And the tragic collapse of the victim when finally he realized that all this wonderful night was merely a setting for a great practical joke, with himself as the unhappy victim, affected her almost as deeply as it did him.

She fled from the place loathing the whole thing, loathing herself. What had prevailed upon her to lend herself to such a cruel baiting of a fine and gentle soul? For that is how she regarded him. In that terrible moment when, the truth having burst upon him, he stood up and cursed his tormentors, he made everybody else there look mean and despicable.

It was thus that she thought of him. In an artificial world which dreaded ridicule more than any other visitation she could think of Hector the barber as Hector the man—whether he was a poet or not.

She passed a wretched night after the banquet, wondering what was happening to him, what possible means could be found to heal his soul from the shock it had received, what Arnaud would have to report to her on the morrow.

v

It was a very dejected and repentant Arnaud who presented himself to her next morning. It was early—just before ten o'clock. She did not keep him long but appeared in the room where he was waiting—her own little sitting-room—in a ravishing *peignoir*.

Arnaud's eyes started a little at sight of her. It was

the first time that he had been privileged to share so much intimacy with her. He was so delighted with what he saw, and desired so much more, that he committed the grave error of forgetting his errand.

"You are bewitching, as you are, dear Lina," he said, after he had kissed her hand.

She gave an impatient little wave of the hand, he had just saluted.

"No compliments on this occasion, please," she said shortly. "What is the news of that poor fellow?"

"Ah!" Arnaud, sitting down, threw up a hand. "There is no news."

"No news. What do you mean?"

"He has gone. Disappeared."

"But I don't understand. How could you let him disappear? He was there in your charge. What happened after I left that dreadful scene last night?"

Arnaud told her; how it had been impossible to approach him; how he had waved them all aside, and stalked off, leaving them not knowing what to do. In the telling of it the barber, to her, seemed to disappear altogether. Here was a man.

"But how *could* you have let him go like that!" she cried.

Arnaud hurried on to the events of the morning, to show that they had really tried to do something. How the four of them had gone early to the hotel, determined to do everything possible to put things right.

"It was tragic," said Arnaud gloomily. "Imagine it. We knocked repeatedly at the poor devil's bedroom. There is no answer. I tell you, we feared the worst. And then, once inside, we find the room empty except for—what do you think? The poor devil's new dress suit. He had thrown the things into a corner—like that, all in a heap. The chambermaid spread them carefully on the bed. They seemed to shout reproaches at us. I have

never seen empty clothes so eloquent. I was never more glad to get out of a place than out of that bedroom."

She listened without interruption to all he had to say about the hotel. She was silent for a few moments after he had finished, her hands clasped in her lap. That touch about the discarded dress clothes in the corner had moved her intensely. She could imagine the mingled despair and disgust which had prompted the barber to hurl them there.

"Poor fellow," she murmured.

Her voice had a break in it which Arnaud, a close student of her moods, had never noticed before. He marvelled to see that her eyes were moist. What a tribute to the ravishing yet unapproachable Lina Bernay, he felt, that she should thus be moved by the misfortunes of an obscure barber from the provinces with whom a good joke had unhappily gone wrong.

She rose abruptly from the couch on which she was sitting and paced the room. He followed her supple movements with keen appreciation. How amazing that one so beautifully dowered should have remained indifferent to the call of life for so long. If it had been anybody but Lina he would never have believed it.

It was a privilege to see her in this moment of concern; to see the real, simple woman, as apart from the actress or the woman of the world. This business of Hector Duval was awkward and a nuisance. It was bad luck for the poor devil, too. Yet he would not have missed it all, for anything. Any circumstance that brought him into closer touch with this elusive and maddening creature was to be commended. And he realized that he had made a success with his description of the bedroom scene. It had been vivid.

She turned to him again, suddenly, her hands clasped under her chin, her eyes looking above and beyond him—out at the scenes she was conjuring up.

"We are both of us despicable assassins," she said simply. •

"Lina!"

"We have killed this man—his soul, anyhow. And you have let him go! How I wish I had never listened to you and gone to that abominable banquet. And yet—it would have been held, just the same, even if I had not gone." She seemed to find food for thought in that.

"Heaven knows I regret having pressed you to go," he said. "I would give anything to have saved you from that scene last night. But how could we tell?"

"We could have told," she said, "because what was proposed was cruel, despicable, no matter whom it concerned." Her eyes rested on him now, but they seemed to be looking through and beyond him, in the same absent way. He had a feeling that he was transparent.

"You must find him," she went on. "We cannot leave things like this. He must be found so that we can tell him how much we regret it—how much I regret it . . . If that will do any good. You *must* find him."

"You know, Lina," he said, "that there is nothing I would not do to please you. How often have I tried to show you that! All these years—always hoping."

He could not resist the temptation, even in that moment, to do a little for the cause always nearest his heart. It passed unnoticed.

"You must find him," she insisted, "not to please me, but to save him. Anything may happen to a man like that after such a dreadful blow. You must tell all the others that he must be found—if it is not too late." •

He raised a hand.

"Ah, no, no, Lina. You mustn't think that. I know how distressed you feel. I admire you for it—if I may say so—as I do for everything. But you must not think that anything has happened to him. I will confess that for a moment, outside that bedroom door . . . But we

are all agreed that he has merely gone away, that there is nothing worse to fear. But if he can be found, he shall be found, dear Lina. I will make it my especial care, get detectives, anything."

"You must. I shall be wretched until you do."

He kissed her hand again before he went away. It was not the hand of a statue. It was too warm for that. But she was a statue to him. When Lucien Delage had broken his absurd neck Arnaud had not the slightest doubt that in time, and more or less on his own terms, he would succeed to what the other had left. But the longer he knew Lina the less reason he seemed to have to hope for ultimate success.

She was incomprehensible. No other woman treated him like this—or affected him like this. Despite considerable experience, the sight of that *peignoir* had quite unnerved him. And it was absurd for a rich man to feel like that in the presence of any woman. Even Lina.

He was inclined to doubt, as he stepped into his handsome limousine waiting below, whether the bearing of news—or lack of it—concerning Hector Duval had been of any particular advantage in his long and patient manœuvring for the favours of Lina.

She had been much too absurdly interested in the other fellow to bother about him! But after all, it added to the catalogue of her advantages, made her if possible just a little more desirable, to show the possession of such a tender heart for a man who meant nothing whatever to her.

• Or to Arnaud either, for the matter of that.

CHAPTER. IX

I

It was more than a week after the disappearance of Hector that Lina received at her flat, sent on from the theatre, what was obviously a parcel of manuscript.

For several days she left the parcel untouched, and it lay on a table near her bedside. One morning after drinking her early chocolate in bed she decided to glance over the contents.

"Marie, cut the cord on that parcel and let me see what is inside it," she said to her maid, who happened to be in the room.

Marie, going to the dressing-table, busied herself with the parcel and brought it, untied, to the bed.

"Another genius, no doubt, Madame," she said, as she handed it over.

Lina smiled. More than once Marie had handed manuscripts to her in bed. She did not like reading manuscripts overmuch, but when it was necessary she preferred to do it in bed. One could think there. Not that many of the plays sent to her needed much thought to decide that they were impossible.

She knew fairly well what to expect. A seductive letter in which the writer held out great promises of his talent for the theatre, and an indifferent—or more likely, a very bad—play in which none of his promises were fulfilled.

But the Etoile needed a success very badly, and she

felt it her duty to examine this parcel. One never knew. She turned over the wrappings of paper. Inside, lying on top of the manuscripts, for there were several, was a single sheet of notepaper which immediately caught her attention.

On it was written the single sentence: "From one who hoped to one who inspired. H. D."

She looked at this incomprehendingly for a moment, and then with a rush of interest realized its import.

This was the first news of him. He was not dead, then. The tragedy of the banquet had not been followed by a greater one. She felt an immense relief.

The dread of final tragedy had been haunting her ever since his disappearance. Following that he had simply vanished. Arnaud had been able to report nothing. But here was the proof that at least he was alive. If she had opened the parcel at once she might have known it days ago.

She turned to the outer wrapper and saw that the postmark was Paris. The date showed that three or four days earlier he was in Paris. Perhaps he was there still. She felt that he probably was. How could he go back among his own people after that appalling fiasco?

"From one who hoped to one who inspired."

She smiled faintly as she re-read it. It seemed a little naïve. Perhaps even a trifle melodramatic. Living in the atmosphere of the theatre she was very sensitive to the slightest suggestion of a false note in real life. But after all, from one who had suffered so intensely, and who must count her among his tormentors, the implied reproach to her was very gentle.

There were four manuscripts, all in a microscopic and amazingly neat handwriting which seemed to speak of competence and sanity. They were, in their way, masterpieces. There was no suggestion about them of the barber forsaking what he could do well for what he could only

do badly. That handwriting gave her a further insight into the character of this strange man; heightened her regard for him. And she was glad in every way that the plays were not typed. That would not have seemed like Hector Duval, wooing his Muse in the far-off little town in the provinces.

But her spirits fell as she examined the manuscripts more closely.

The first was entitled "Harmodius and Aristogiton." A rapid glance showed that it was in blank verse. She put it aside with a sigh.

The second bore the title "The Sorrows of Psyche." It seemed a little more promising. But this also was in blank verse. She put it aside.

Poor Hector! It did not seem that he was likely to come to the rescue of the Etoile Theatre.

Next "Holofernes: A Tragedy in Five Acts."

"Oh, la, la!" Lina murmured in dismay as she put that down also. She might have known, of course, that it would be like this.

She picked up the remaining manuscript with all hope gone. But her eyes lighted up with interest as she found that it bore the title "Juliette Shows the Way," and that it was further described as "A Comedy of Provincial Manners."

"Ah, this looks more promising," she murmured. "The others, my dear Hector, frightened me."

And settling herself comfortably on the pillow, with one hand propping up her chin, she glanced critically down the list of characters, and then began to read the first act.

Had Hector been able to see the picture she made as she lay there reading his comedy, life just then would not have seemed so hopeless to him. But then the spectacle of Lina Bernay lying like a delicate flower in her great Empire bed, the glory of her copper hair thrown

into relief by the whiteness of the linen on which it lay, her face alight with interest and amusement as she turned the pages of the manuscript, was one that many people would have given much to see.

As she continued reading Marie entered.

"Madame's bath is ready."

"Leave me alone," was all that Madame replied, without looking up. • •

She read on steadily, and Marie who peeped into the room from time to time forbore to make any further interruption. She knew the symptoms expressed on her mistress's face. It was but rarely they were seen there.

"She's found something good," Marie murmured, and resigned herself to the bath going cold.

Some little time later Lina closed the manuscript and laid it down. She stretched out wide her fascinating arms, and lay flat on her back, looking up at the ceiling, musing on what she had read.

"It's something new," she murmured. "Something quite new. If friend Hector can keep up that first act anything may happen."

Her thoughts flew, as they had done so many times, to the final scene at the banquet.

"Poor fellow!"

Then she turned to the manuscript again. But she had not been reading the second act long when she called out, in her musical voice, for Marie.

"Telephone Monsieur Arnaud," she said. "Tell him that I want him to come and lunch with me to-day. And say I have some interesting news."

Marie departed.

"And now let us see if you have really done it, my poor Hector," Lina murmured.

II

M. Gustave Arnaud was a pleasantly plump *viveur* in the late thirties who seemed to know most people worth knowing in Paris. He was a member of that vague and varied but distinguished and amusing social circle known as *le tout Paris*, and whatever *le tout Paris* thought about Arnaud, he was quite certain that the social life of the capital would be conscious of a distinct loss without his presence.

Arnaud was wealthy—his father had been a very successful biscuit manufacturer—and had not found it difficult to secure the production of two of his plays; rather anæmic comedies, neither of which had appealed to Paris. But they had made a playwright of him, and that was a great deal to one who attached so much importance to the opinion of the world in which he moved.

Among other advantages he had acquired an interest in the Etoile Theatre. He desired only one thing more in life than that the leading artist of that theatre should appear in one of his own comedies. That other thing was the possession of the artist herself. His real aim was a combination of the two. Then he felt he might be reasonably happy.

The one desire was bound up with the other. As to his suit, he had by no means given up hope. Lina was an extraordinary person, and the ordinary rules of the pursuit of the other sex did not apply to her. Following the death of Lucien Delage he had no doubt that in good time the succession would be his. There was a bond between them over that affair, which, he felt, could not be denied. After all, however slight the reason, he had been the cause of Delage's jealous and homicidal rush from Deauville. It was directly due to Arnaud, indeed,

that Delage had broken his silly neck, and made it possible for her to live a reasonable existence. He felt that she owed him gratitude.

True Lina had never yet displayed any. But naturally she would be careful about displaying such an emotion in such circumstances, and he felt it was there all the same. What he was quite certain of was that there was no real rival, although a certain Senhor de Roza, lately arrived with his millions from Brazil, had been showing her much attention.

It was true that Arnaud had never yet dreamed of anything so banal as marriage. Lina, he thought, quite understood him there. He felt that was no reason why she should not be ready to reciprocate the tender passion he felt for her. The theatrical world was not the ordinary world. Dramatists were seldom married; or if they were, usually found a real mate from the theatre. It helped so much in the writing of plays—for a time, at any rate. Moreover, a star of light comedy was expected to have an acknowledged masculine protector. Who more suitable in this case than Arnaud himself?

But both in this respect and in regard to his plays, Lina had such a disconcerting way of not seeing his point of view. She had never told him that he was not the man for her. But she had told him quite bluntly that he had not yet written anything good enough for her. Much may be pardoned a great artist, but Arnaud felt that there ought to be limits. Certainly in his case.

But she was so charmingly frank and casual about everything that it was impossible for him to construe her manner into a grievance. She had a way of turning any advances he made—whether amorous or literary—into something of no account. She did not take him quite seriously; called him, when he was most serious, "my little Arnaud"; treated all he said and did with just a suspicion of *blague*. It was very irritating sometimes,

though so charmingly done. But what could a man do with one of Lina's attractions and attainments? A woman who, moreover, had adopted the incredible rôle in life of making herself free of any kind of masculine support or attention!

III

Arnaud was delighted to receive the telephone message from Lina's maid. He looked to his toilet with a little extra care, and passed a hand over his plump, clean-shaven face, adorned by a gleaming monocle, with considerable satisfaction before departing. He wondered what her interesting news could be.

He found Lina looking her best—but then she always did—saluted her hand with great fervour, and told her how ravishing she looked. She acknowledged it with a smile which left matters where they were. She had a genius for that.

"And now, dear Lina," said Arnaud, as they sat down to table in the bright dining-room overlooking the broad avenue, "what is this interesting news you have for me?"

"First of all," she said, "is there still no news of Hector Duval?"

Arnaud shrugged his shoulders, and spread out his hands a little. He had become slightly tired of the subject.

"None. Absolutely none. It is just as it was when I saw you last. He seems to have gone into thin air. All sorts of inquiries are still being made, but so far with no result. I saw de Bac and Dufayel only yesterday. We are still agreed that it is better not to consult the police. It was wise not to do that, you will agree, in case—well, in case anything had happened. Not that we

dream of that for a moment. But we are still active. And nothing whatever—not a line—has yet been published in any of the newspapers. That has been well managed. As a matter of fact I had that in hand myself.”

“And all the newspapers agreed to say nothing whatever about it?” she queried.

“Not exactly. It was not easy keeping it out of several of the smaller sheets. In the end we had to buy them off. Look at this!” His hand flew to an inner pocket. He brought out a pocket book, and from it extracted a long strip of printed paper—a newspaper-proof. “Read that.” He handed it to her.

Lina saw that it bore several large headlines, the first of which was “Tragedy of a Poet.” Glancing through it she saw that it was a fairly accurate account of the whole affair; beginning with the little plot that inveigled Hector to Paris; continuing with a florid description of the banquet and its unexpected termination, and ending by hinting that the victim had committed suicide.

Her hands trembled a little as she read the article. How brutal and cruel it all seemed, set down there in cold print.

“Well?” she asked quietly, suppressing the tremor which threatened to declare itself in her voice.

“Well, obviously we could not let a thing like that appear. It was presented to me like a pistol. Immediate publication if I did not pay up on the spot! *Ah, les cochons!* I tell you I said something to the little rat of a man who brought it. Five thousand francs he demanded—money down. I sent him to the Devil. He started to go, but soon came back. I knew he would. Well, in the end I bought them off for half. Would one believe that there were such people!”

Arnaud’s voice expressed the virtuous indignation he felt.

Lina smiled faintly. It occurred to her that it took all

sorts of people to make a world, and that Arnaud was one of them. His anger about the money would have been amusing under any other circumstances.

"You were right not to let it be published—even if it cost you twice what the man asked," she said.

Arnaud made a gesture which might have meant anything.

"But this suggestion that he has committed suicide," she continued deliberately. "Are you absolutely sure there is nothing in it?" She watched Arnaud with keen interest, alive to his slightest expression, although her eyes did not betray it.

Arnaud frowned down at the tablecloth and rolled a morsel of bread between his fingers. He seemed both puzzled over the problem and irritated by it.

"Yes," he said after a short silence. "We have all come to the conclusion that had anything happened it would have happened in his bedroom at the hotel. No," he continued, his brow clearing, "we think he has just disappeared—gone away. We have made very discreet inquiries at the place he came from. Up to yesterday there was no news of him. That's all we know. Poor devil! Let's talk of something else. What is this news of yours? Come, dear Lina, let us talk of something pleasant."

Arnaud showed quite plainly that in spite of his sympathy for the "poor devil" he could soon have enough of the subject.

But she showed no inclination to depart from it. A new idea, vague as yet, had come into her mind. She would test Arnaud a little further.

"But even supposing that nothing has happened to him," she said, "what if we are never able to find him again? Suppose we are never able to make it up to him in any way—to let him know how much we regret the whole thing? That would be terrible."

Arnaud spread out his hands with a gesture of helplessness.

"But what is to be done? What *can* we do? If he disappears—he disappears. There is no more to be said. It is a pity, no doubt, but, in a way, the matter is finished."

"And the others—what do they say?"

"*Ma foi*, I imagine they think as I do. If we could find him we would do our best to help him. But we have done all we can—and there is no more to be done. After all, there are other things in the world besides Hector Duval. In a sense it was his own fault. He should not have been so absurd as to think that he was a poet."

"In other words, we do our best to wreck this man—to crush his soul in order to amuse a few worldly and *blasé* people, and having done so we are content to let him go on suffering, somewhere alone, like some poor wounded animal!"

She spoke hotly. Arnaud made a movement of despair.

"Truly, Lina, you are a little difficult to-day. What can I do? I tell you we have tried our best. If we could find him we would give him money, or try to find him something suitable to do. Gladly. But as it is we are powerless."

She could not help admitting to herself that there was some little justice in what he said. But she felt a good deal of bitterness against him and his friends. None of them seemed to feel the real tragedy: that a fine soul had been put to torture from which it might never recover. Her impression was that they wished to find the barber in order to acquit their consciences in any manner possible, and then have done for ever with a painful subject.

And the idea which had come into her head took clearer shape. She made a decision.

"Yes, I suppose you are right," she admitted, apparently mollified. "If you cannot find him there is nothing to be done."

"Evidently," exclaimed Arnaud, with obvious relief. "That is all that can be said. And now, Lina, what is the news you have to tell me? I am dying to hear it."

She smiled an adorable smile that made Arnaud's pulses beat faster.

"I think we have found the comedy we are looking for," she said.

The news came as a most disagreeable shock to Arnaud. He stared at her, frowning.

The Etoile would soon be needing a new play. Neither of the last two produced there had been a real success, and there was need of something particularly good to follow. There were several in view but nothing so markedly good, in Lina's opinion, that a decision had yet been made. One of them was by Arnaud himself, and he was determined to make every effort to force its production. For Lina now to tell him that there was a new rival in the field, and one whom she definitely fancied, was the last news he wished to hear.

"Who is it by?" he asked, repressing his ill-humour as well as he could.

"It is anonymous."

"But you must know who has written it," he insisted.

"I have some idea, although it is not much more than surmise. But I shall not be permitted to tell. There is at present a mystery about it."

"But is he a well-known man?"

"No. Comparatively unknown."

There was silence, heavy with meaning. Arnaud was trying to adjust himself to the new situation. But his anger and disappointment would not be denied expression.

"But, Lina, this is not nice. It is not fair. What is more, I cannot agree to it. You know that I had other ideas. There is Fleury's play . . ."

"Oh, Fleury." She shrugged her shoulders. "He is better at finding comedies in real life. He found Hector Duval."

Arnaud waved this aside.

"But there is mine. You know how much I wish you to appear in it. And now you talk of a mysterious newcomer. No, Lina, it is too much. You go too far."

"What you say does not exactly represent the facts. It is agreed, is it not, that I must approve of the next piece we present? So far I had seen nothing of which I approved entirely. All had something attractive in them—your own included, my dear Arnaud. . . ."

"Many thanks," he said, with an ironical inclination of the head.

"Not at all. But there was nothing which—let us say—overwhelmed me; nothing to which I was attracted with any urgency. While now . . ."

She paused.

"Well, and now?"

"I have found something quite different, something which attracts me very much. It deals with the provinces—with the jealousies and humours of life in a sleepy little town. It has delicious situations. There is an *ingénue* of the provinces, if you please, whom I should love to play—a saucy little minx who confounds the elderly admirer selected by her family and marries the man she wants. She is adorable. The whole play is something new. I tell you, Paris might go mad over it. We are all just a little tired of jaded and intriguing society people; of husbands who neglect their wives and wives who deceive their husbands. There are other things in life, after all. This is a breeze fresh from the country, and it will tell the Parisian a little about a land he has never seen—France. You will see, my friend. It will be the rage."

Arnaud looked at her with smouldering eyes. It was a long time since he had seen her so enthusiastic about

anything. He thought with intense chagrin of his own comedy, and her nonchalant attitude to it.

"And why should the play be anonymous?" he asked. "What is the author afraid of?"

"That I don't know. So far I know little more than you. But what I do know is that it is what I am looking for, and that you will applaud my judgment when you have read it."

Arnaud drew his chubby lips into as thin a line as they would go. He frowned at the table.

"Lina, I will be frank with you. I shall oppose you in this to my utmost. To my utmost. You count for much at the Etoile. Your word means more than anybody's. Agreed. But there are limits. I shall have to put this matter before Descouvres. Our dear Director is looking to me to find a considerable share of the finances for the next production. And I cannot be expected to find money to finance the play of a mysterious individual who is brought forward at the last moment."

"But suppose when you have read the comedy, or when I have read it to you, you are bound to admit that it is the very thing we want?" she demanded.

Arnaud tried to cover with a wry smile his discomfiture at this awkward question.

"You ask too much. You ask me to sacrifice myself for an unknown. No, I do not pretend to be a superman."

For a moment Lina was on the verge of losing her temper. She felt convinced that she could force the play through even in the teeth of Arnaud's opposition. But perhaps diplomacy would be better with this vain and selfish man, for so she now regarded him. It is to be feared that she had no sympathy whatever with his keen disappointment.

She rose from the table with a laugh.

"Come, my friend." She took his arm and led him towards a couch. "Sit here. We will have coffee, and

I will read the play to you—I, Lina Bernay, will entertain you.” She threw herself into a dramatic pose, and then laughed at herself. “And we will see what effect it makes on one of the leading men of letters of Paris; one whose taste and judgment is universally admired.”

In spite of himself Arnaud thawed a little to the bantering compliment. There was not much that Lina Bernay could not do in playing on the hearts of men. But he was very far from being appeased.

“Lina, you go too far with me?”

“Too far?” she repeated innocently.

“You know that I have been devoted to you—ardently, passionately devoted—for years past.”

She raised her eyebrows.

“It has not prevented your showing a varied devotion elsewhere.”

He made a gesture of impatience.

“Be reasonable, Lina. You may live a life apart from all the rest of the world. Virginal. More than virginal, for you have known what life is. Incredible. But you cannot demand it of me.”

“I demand nothing,” she said calmly.

He cursed himself for the slip he had made. She was always so much better at this sort of fence than he was. But he made a partial recovery.

“You know, Lina,” he said, with a touch of humility, “that I ask nothing better than that you should.”

“It is far too much to expect of any man, my dear Gustave. You know that as well as I do. I would not dream of doing it. The man has not yet been born who can be faithful to one woman.”

She was deliberately playing the cynic, and he knew it. Shouldering him off with her pretence about that fantastic husband of hers. Using the faint echoes of a long-ago tragedy to keep him eternally at arm’s length. He prided himself with reason on his skill with the foils in the

salle d'armes. But he could never penetrate Lina's defence in this verbal rapier play.

He returned to the attack, desperately. Not only his passion was at stake, but his play.

"But if I tell you, Lina, that I am that man. That I *could* do it. That I could swear eternal devotion, and keep my vow—gladly."

She looked at him incredulously; those violet eyes which affected him so deeply, widening with astonishment. For one moment his heart leaped at the thought that he had convinced her; that by the simple expression of feelings which, as he uttered the words, he was almost persuaded were wholly sincere, he had achieved the miracle for which he had been so long waiting.

She believed him! She really only wanted sincerity and a true devotion, and he had succeeded in making her feel that he could bring these to her life, which had been so long incomplete!

And then, as he gazed at this wonderful thing he had evoked, her head went back and she emitted a trill of happy laughter; an escape of pure merriment that seemed to be the expression of a heart suddenly rendered gay by the unexpected reception of an idea of pure comedy.

"You, my dear Gustave," she cried, merriment still escaping and bubbling from her. "*You*, of all men as the faithful lover! . . . You, the famous *viveur*. How about Madame This and Madame That. And a certain charming Roumanian. And a bewitching Spaniard, with whom you used to be seen. Not to mention others! And Mademoiselle Fifi d'Artois. Eh? *You* of all men to aspire to be the constant lover! Oh, no, that is too good." And her laughter trilled out again.

For the life of him Arnaud could not decide how much of this was sincere and how much of it came from the perfect actress; whether that happy laughter was a

natural ebullition or a pure work of art. But he realized that he was routed.

He threw up his hands.

"You are impossible, Lina. Impossible. Sometimes I despair. You make a mockery of my devotion. And now you wound me in my next tenderest spot. You propose to produce a play by an unknown individual and announce that it is to take precedence over my own. But if I am powerless as a lover I am not a cypher as a man of affairs. That play, to be produced, will have to get past me. It may not be easy." He looked very determined.

Her mood changed. The merriment had gone. She was softly sympathetic.

"What you say is true, my dear Gustave. It is precisely to the man of affairs that I wish to appeal. That is why I brought you here to-day. The lover can wait. His time is not yet. But the theatre needs a great success. I think I have found it, but I want your opinion too. Now you sit quietly there, produce your cigarettes, and listen while I read to you the first act."

"We shall see," he grumbled. But he submitted.

There was a powerful factor operating which helped to make Arnaud the slave of her moods. He might be rebuffed every time he tried to approach closer to her. But he was at any rate the only man in Paris who was allowed to be so intimate with the much-desired and incomprehensible Lina. He was the nearest approach to a lover she had. It increased his social prestige and ministered to his vanity. His movements might be severely restricted, but he was the only one in the field. It was a very heavy counterweight to his anger at the appearance of this pestiferous play from nowhere.

And Lina, quite well aware of all this, picked up the first act of "Juliette Shows the Way" and set herself deliberately to charm and blandish him.

She had a definite scheme in mind, and it would need all her arts, all her woman's wiles, to carry it through. Its success, she knew, would come as a thunderclap to this man who needed to be nursed and cajoled for the accomplishment of her purpose. But the end was justice, and she felt that it justified the means. The fact that Arnaud was cast for the rôle of victim made her voice, as she read, all the more dangerously seductive. It would do him good. • •

"Poor fellow!"

CHAPTER X

I

LOOKING back on his first two or three days in Paris, following his flight from the Grand Hotel, Hector was hardly conscious of how he had passed the time.

He had walked about the deserted streets of early morning, carrying his bag, until he realized that he was very tired. After a long time he found a café just opening, somewhere near the Place de la République, and sitting down thankfully on the terrace ordered coffee. There he sat for some hours, his bag at his feet, watching the city gradually awakening to life.

What to do? Where to go?

There was no reason why he should remain in Paris. He felt that he loathed the place. But he could not return to St. Médard. He had no idea what to do or where to go.

There came a time when he realized that he was hungry, and went inside the café to eat. Doing these simple, elemental things kept him from thinking. That respite passed in time, and he felt he could not sit in the same café all day. He wandered forth with his bag again, saw the sign of a small hotel as he passed a side street, and obtained a room there. The room did not interest him, but he could at any rate leave his bag in it.

So for several days he wandered round Paris, looking at the unfamiliar sights of the great city through eyes

which only partially comprehended what they saw, and returning late to the hotel at night. He was merely drifting along, without the power or the desire to decide on anything.

One evening he found himself outside a theatre which displayed that same poster of Lina Bernay which had arrested him on the morning after the banquet. He went inside and sat listening to the entrancing voice that was so closely woven into his tragedy. • It was impossible to believe that once he had sat with her, talking to her. . . . That was a lifetime ago.

He did not like the piece she was in. It was drawing to the end of its run, and there was a perfunctory air about some of the actors. But what stirred his dislike was the part Lina played. It was that of a wife who deceived her husband and did it with an air of complete cynicism, and even bluffed him into disbelieving the truth when she was found out.

She had treated him with cynicism too; been one of those gathered to laugh at him. Yet he hated seeing her play so convincingly a part such as this.

When the curtain finally came down it was as though a dream was over. He had to leave the magic of her presence and slowly move out into the streets among the crowds that meant so little to him.

The laughing people on the pavements, the general air of gaiety and liveliness, the flashing lights, all this seemed false and meaningless to him. Paris was a cursed city.

•

II

Later he sat in a small café near the Gare St. Lazare, drinking cognac, gazing steadily before him, his mind ceaselessly reviewing the procession of events of the past

few weeks. It had all developed as in a play, leading up to a great climax. It was over. He was finished. He did not see where he could start again. The action was dead.

Hector as he sat stonily there became aware in time that he had become an object of interest to a man who sat alone at the next table. A little man, florid of complexion, with a striking pair of moustaches which he caressed continually. The florid little man frequently looked at Hector with a sidelong glance. It occurred to Hector that his neighbour seemed to be the victim of some sort of agitation.

Finally the stranger spoke.

"My friend, you are in trouble."

"Many people are in trouble," said Hector.

"That is true. Profoundly true. Myself, for example. I am in trouble. A woman, naturally."

"Naturally." It was comforting to exchange words with another human being, even though he seemed to be half drunk.

"Yes. A woman, of course. Here I sit in deep trouble. I look at you and say to myself: He also is in trouble. What a world! Everywhere one turns one finds men rendered mad by women. I am more than half of a mind to do something desperate. And I see you in the same state. It would be better, perhaps, to do something desperate together."

Hector awoke a little at this. His new acquaintance certainly seemed in a mood to do something desperate. There was evidence on his table that he had been drinking deeply. Hector roused himself to take an interest in something other than his own despair.

The stranger proved to be very voluble about his affairs. Returning to Paris after a short absence he had found that his adored *amie*, Ernestine, had flown with another man. Just a brief letter left waiting for him, to say so. She

was beautiful, and he loved her desperately. The shock had been appalling.

Hector found his mind clearing a little, and his sympathies rising. Other people suffered. Here was a kind of trouble he had never experienced.

Caressing his moustaches proudly the stranger confided that he was a traveller in wine, and that his name was Vibert.

"*Moi, je voyage dans le vin,*" he said often, with a sort of reverence. He knew all France, from end to end. And this time he had returned to Paris, looking forward to a glad reunion—to find his beloved Ernestine gone. Having explained all this he called for more cognac, and pressed Hector to drink with him.

They sat there until the café turned them out, and then wandered a little way and found another still open. Hector found in Vibert some relief from his own engrossing trouble. He proved to have an amazing capacity for liquor of all descriptions. He was not only a traveller in wine but an immense consumer of it. Constantly he announced that he was on the point of doing something desperate, and Hector wondered when he might have to intervene. But always Vibert decided to put off the evil moment by calling for something more to drink.

"Say, then, my friend, can a man go on living with a broken heart?" he demanded almost fiercely.

"It must be difficult," said Hector, thinking of his own plight.

They passed the night out of their beds, wandering from café to café. It ended with Vibert, who did not seem able to get drunk beyond a certain point, insisting on Hector coming to stay at his own hotel. He needed looking after, said Vibert. They both needed looking after. They would be better together.

"I will take you to a little hotel where I am known,"

said Vibert. "But then I am known in every hotel, everywhere."

Feeling desperately in need of sleep Hector consented. They took a cab, collected his bag from his own hotel, and went on. Vibert's hotel was a small place, the Hôtel de la Butte Sacrée, situated in a tiny tree-lined square far up the hillside of Montmartre. Hector liked the look of it much better than the one he had left, and tumbled thankfully into bed, forgetting Vibert's troubles and his own.

For two days after that they made the round of the smaller cafés of the region, sitting together for hours at a time, Vibert's capacity for drink keeping pace with his constant flow of talk. He was too full of his own subject to inquire much into the reason of Hector's trouble, although he made one or two vaporous attempts to find out. He took it for granted that a woman was at the bottom of it. Hector let him think so. . . . There was even a proportion of truth in it.

"They are devils, these women," said Vibert. "They will wreck a man as easily as you or I will drink a glass of wine."

"Just as easily," said Hector. He began to feel a faint comfort in the idea that his fate was bound up with that of Lina Bernay; that he was in some degree the victim of the most wonderful woman alive.

III

At last Vibert announced definitely that he was about to end it all. He had drunk himself by this time into a state which would have been stupor in any other man but left him with a passable command over his speech and actions. He went to a gunsmith's shop in the Rue de Clichy, and Hector docilely accompanied him. Though he had by no means kept pace with Vibert he was himself

affected by their continued potations. It did not seem to him by now that there was anything very strange in Vibert's action. He had been too near the same thing himself to regard Vibert as behaving in any very unnatural fashion. But it occurred to him that if Vibert made away with himself he would have nobody to talk to. He could not contemplate the idea of again being utterly alone in Paris.

The man in him began to assert itself again.

"Don't be a fool," he said as they arrived at the gunsmith's window, and looked at its formidable array of weapons. "Come away."

"No, my friend," said Vibert, looking up at him owlishly. "The moment has come. I will teach Ernestine to run away with another man. You shall help me to select a weapon."

"To the devil with such nonsense," Hector growled. "There are enough women and wine left in the world for ten thousand like you. Come along." And seizing him in a grip that would not be denied he marched him away.

"You were right," said Vibert a few moments later, as he led the way into another café. "There are plenty of both left. And I hate firearms. The look of them makes me shudder. No, when the moment comes it will be poison or the Seine for me."

And even in his dazed, unhappy state Hector began to comprehend that Vibert did not mean all he said. It dawned on him that he was a *farceur*. But he felt attracted to him. He was his one friend in all Paris, and Hector preferred his company infinitely to the devastating loneliness of the first few days.

It was the morning after this incident that Vibert announced that he must begin to attend to work again. He came into Hector's room looking dishevelled and pale, but obviously more or less sober.

"Women are all very well, *mon brave*," he announced, "but a man must live. I must go and see the *patron*."

Hector accompanied him to the offices of his firm, in a depressing street near the Gare du Nord, and waited for him outside. Vibert must have had a stormy interview. He came out looking very serious and shaken.

"If I were not the best traveller in the wine trade," he announced simply, "I should now be on the pavement. These men of affairs make no allowance for grief or sentiment. They care not what agony I have been suffering. All they want are orders for their beastly red ink. I am to go at once to Rouen and Havre. Do you come with me, or stay in Paris? But first of all let us eat something. I am famished."

They both needed food. Hector required little urging to decide to accompany Vibert. It had occurred to him that Havre was on the way to America. He felt that once he had left Paris he would have no desire to return to it. His mind dwelt on the idea of cutting everything, and sailing off to a new country.

But before setting off with Vibert there was one thing to be done, of which he said nothing to his friend. Immediately on getting back to the hotel he carefully packed up his manuscripts, addressed them to Lina Bernay at the Etoile Theatre and took them round to the post office. He felt as he sent them away that it was a definite adieu to his old life. Then they took a cab to the Gare St. Lazare, and caught the train to Rouen.

After a day in the old cathedral city, which soothed Hector after the bustle and cruel vastness of Paris, they went on to Havre. They walked along the main boulevard from the station, each carrying his bag. Vibert was talking eloquently of the excellences of the little hotel where they were to stay. The cooking and the wine were as good as anything in all France. Trust him for knowing the best places. Everywhere! He had recovered his spirits considerably, and at times was almost gay.

Suddenly as they walked along Vibert noticed on the other side of the road an attractive young person.

"*Tiens!*" he exclaimed in excitement, "if that isn't Amélie. She is an old friend of mine."

"She is pretty," said Hector unguardedly.

"Is she not?" Vibert was a changed man. "Go on to the hotel. You will easily find it. Tell Madame that I am coming. She will make you welcome. I will be with you again in an hour—two at most."

And to Hector's astonishment and annoyance Vibert was gone in the track of his lady friend.

For twenty-four hours and more Hector remained in and about the hotel, with no sign of Vibert. It was raining, and the melancholy of Havre oppressed him terribly.

The scenes from Maupassant's novel "*Pierre et Jean*" came to his mind as he wandered about the streets and down to the quays, and everywhere he went he saw re-enacted the incidents of that unhappy story, as Maupassant had placed them. The hoot of a steamer sounded like the wail of a lost soul—like the cry of his own. His vague project of going to America became more and more absurd the more he looked at it. He missed Vibert, and would have given much to see him again. Being in Havre alone was more than he could stand. With Vibert absent, on business or otherwise, there was no possible reason why he should remain there.

He left a note for his friend and took the train back to Paris.

His dominating thought still was that he could not go back to St. Médard. But he preferred being alone in Paris to being alone in Havre. And his brain was clearing a little. He realized that the extravagant Vibert had served his turn, and once back in Paris wanted to see no more of him. All the same he returned, gratefully, to the little hotel in Montmartre. There was a certain amount of familiarity and welcome about that.

The next day he noticed an advertisement in a newspaper and decided to answer it. It was time something was done. There was obviously nothing for it but to return to his old trade. Though he had loathed it he had never despised it. In any case it was the only thing to do. He could not wander alone round Paris any more.

v

M. Lepetit, presiding over his glittering hairdressing establishment, which lay in a side street just off the Boulevard des Capucines, was favourably impressed by the applicant for the situation he had advertised, and engaged him on the spot.

The other men in the establishment were not quite so favourably impressed by the newcomer. He had a reserved, even dignified manner, and spoke only when spoken to. But it was generally agreed that he knew his business, and that was the chief thing—especially in the view of M. Lepetit.

The proprietor, indeed, was in every way satisfied with his new employee. He noticed that all customers went away looking contented after submitting to the ministrations of this grave assistant. M. Lepetit was a thinking

man, and believed that psychology could play as notable a part in hairdressing as in anything else.

In his opinion there were barbers who merely by their touch caused active irritation to their clients, and set their nerves on edge; there were others who were merely negative, and left their subjects indifferent; and there were still others who exerted a soothing, even caressing, influence and made those who were in their hands get up from their chairs feeling younger and happier men.

"I know not what it is," M. Lepetit was accustomed to say to his friends, "but there is a subtle something which passes immediately between the artist and his subject. It is mysterious, one cannot put one's hand on it, and yet it is there. I had a man once with red hair—red as a crayfish—who afterwards tried to murder his mother-in-law. But he was an artist if ever there was one. The moment his hand touched a client's head the client would close his eyes and sit there happy—full of bliss. They used to wait for him in a row. He became almost a nuisance. Yes, let me watch a man at work for half an hour, and I will tell you what class to put him in."

He put his new employee into the highest class, and was well content.

As for Hector, he was equally unaware of the opinion of his employer or the other assistants. He worked away mechanically, glad of the constant bustle in the big shop. The clients who were waited on by Hector may have been pleasantly aware of his presence, but he was scarcely aware of theirs. He saw merely a constant succession of heads and faces, and worked dreamily away, with only half his mind on the task.

He was still a man who had received a stunning blow from which he had only partially recovered. His recollections of the time following the banquet, of his wanderings with Vibert, had become curiously vague. It all seemed unreal. Life itself still seemed unreal.

CHAPTER XI

I

HECTOR continued to live on in the little hotel high up in Montmartre. Its *clientèle*, he found out later, was by no means above suspicion. There were sometimes mysterious comings and goings. Some of its population was very short-lived. Mme. Angelet, who presided over it, possessed a catholic mind in such matters. She welcomed serious clients like Hector. Their permanence made her feel that her hotel was really an hotel. They represented that sober section of society without which, as everybody knew, the world could not go on. But there were all sorts of other people in the world—other sorts of clients—and if some of them drifted her way, who was she to deny them? The world was like that, and her establishment but a part of it.

Hector did not allow this to disturb him. Mme. Angelet showed herself particularly gracious to him. His room was fairly comfortable and cheap. The place served him well enough for his bed, and for coffee in the morning, which was the extent of his needs there.

His life continued to be a lonely one. At seven o'clock M. Lepetit's hairdressing establishment closed, and he then walked along the Boulevards—flashing and sparkling in their greatest animation—up the steep streets to Montmartre, and so to a little café restaurant which he had also discovered in the company of Vibert, where the food was cheap and good.

He lingered over dinner and his coffee as long as possible, and then walked farther up the hill to his hotel. Ten o'clock or a little later found him in bed—hours before the Montmartre of pleasure, farther down the hill, was thinking of waking up for the night.

"A young man of an extraordinary seriousness," was Mme. Angelet's description of him. In all her years of hotel keeping she had never known a client better qualified to take a prize for virtue. • •

Hector felt that he was as well in bed as anywhere, and there was always the comfort of reading, and bookshops by the dozen to help him. He did not know a soul in Paris, but in the bookshops he could find friends, old and new.

In his present mood he deliberately turned his back on the theatres and the many other attractions of life in Paris. There was a wonderland for him to explore, but the shock of his first experience was still too heavy upon him for him to venture there again. Having been given a peep inside Paradise he had no mind to look on it from the outside. And he was not made of the stuff of those who try to revenge themselves on unkind fate by giving way to dissipation. The experience with Vibert had been more an accident than anything else.

II

But he was not too aloof from life to observe that near to the table at which he always sat when dining at his favourite café there was often seated, also dining alone, a distinctly pretty and attractive girl, dark and *petite*, with most expressive eyes. She obviously kept herself very much apart from certain phases of existence which went on around them, but all the same her eye had often met his. She was distinctly interesting, and Hector occasionally

found himself wondering who she was, and what she did.

There came an evening when the accident of somebody else having taken Hector's usual place put him at the next table to hers. They were only separated by a foot or so of space. Conversation opened as naturally as if they were old friends.

"You are often here, Mademoiselle," said Hector after they had eyed each other over the opening stages of the meal.

"As you see. It is cheap. The cooking is good. What can one ask more?"

She smiled merrily as she spoke, showing an inviting row of teeth. The ice was broken. They were friends.

A polite conversation followed. She soon learned that Hector was new to Paris. The fact surprised her. Having lived there all her life she could hardly imagine that any adult person should be new to it.

She questioned him as to what he had seen in Paris, and exclaimed at hearing that it was so little. More intimate matters followed. Hector was not one to dissemble. He mentioned what he did.

Her eyes opened wide.

"A barber! Impossible!"

"Why?" he asked, laughing. He was sufficient of a philosopher not to be disturbed by her evident surprise at his calling.

"Because you don't look like one. I was sure you were an artist or at least a poet—though to be sure you are better dressed than most of them. But there are so many of those round here I thought you must be one. One would say so, by the look of you."

He laughed again, but she did not know with how little merriment.

"No, I'm not a poet. Just what I said, and no more."

"It is extraordinary," she murmured, regarding him

intently, apparently not wholly believing him. "At least, if you are a barber, you are not an ordinary one. Anybody could see that. You are probably a proprietor." She added all this with conviction.

"Not even that . . . not now, at any rate. But I hope that won't prevent our being good friends."

"But of course not. Why should it? Anyhow, anybody can see that you have a story in your life. One can tell by your eyes, by your expression. That is plain to see." She was determined to score her point.

"We all have a story in our lives."

"It is true." She became pensive, and looked down at the cloth. She seemed even to sigh.

But she soon brightened up again and began to tell him about herself. She worked in a big dressmaking establishment in the Rue de la Paix, Roget's. She was an assistant *vendeuse*, and earned good money. She helped to attend to the clients, she explained, while the beautiful mannequins showed off the frocks. Her father and mother were dead. She had lived with an aunt, but they had quarrelled, and she had gone to live alone. Then . . . What he said was quite right. Everybody had a story in their lives. But there, it was over, and one was better alone, was it not so?

All this with a rapidly changing play of expression, and a quick transition from gay to grave and back again. Hector was thoroughly interested. He realized that other people in the world had their worries and troubles, and perhaps knew how to meet them with more courage than he had shown.

Dinner over they went out together as though they were friends of long standing. A few moments' walk, and they stood on the Place Blanche, with its flashing, garish lights, and rolling traffic. The red sails of the Moulin Rouge were slowly revolving opposite them.

"All that"—she indicated the hectic attractions of Montmartre with a sweep of her arm, "does not interest

me. It is not worth while. I will take you elsewhere where you will be really amused. Shall we go?"

"But with pleasure."

She slipped her arm through his with a little suggestion of possession, and led him off. Hector felt that he enjoyed the sensation. For the first time Paris, of which he had so often and so fondly dreamed, seemed to have given him a caress instead of a blow.

"My name is Marcelle," she said. "What is yours?"

"Hector."

"It is a nice name."

As they walked along Marcelle commented freely on the varieties of people they passed. Paris with her was an instinct. She knew this world in its most intimate details. Hector found himself interested as he had never been before. Vibert had only one subject of conversation. Marcelle tripped about from one thing to another, full of exclamations and observations.

Some of her comments had a sensational tinge—echoes of the assize courts—but Hector found these as interesting as any others. That man slouching past was a thorough beast; one who preyed on women. The police had had him once, and the sooner they did again the better. That pretty woman was a virago. She had once used a knife. The policeman over there was known as Fat Alphonse, but was brave and had once got the better of two dangerous *apaches*. And so on.

And all the while she seemed to throw about him a mantle of protection. She was the superior leading the novice. Her attitude of proprietorship pleased him, and the sense of this tall man's ignorance of the world in which they were appealed to her.

She stopped at a low door, descended two or three steps, drew aside a curtain, and they found themselves in the cabaret of "The Immense Gustave" in full blast. Gustave himself, a very large, fat man, wearing a huge

sombrero hat and a black velvet suit with high boots, was standing on a box near the piano roaring out a song. He stopped as the newcomers entered, and hurled several uncomplimentary remarks at them. Marcelle laughed, and whispered to Hector that he must not mind. It was the custom of the place.

Gustave's song, Hector soon found, was highly improper, but nobody, Marcelle included, seemed to mind. There were grotesque paintings on the walls, which Marcelle explained were the work of well-known artists. The air was thick with tobacco smoke, and everybody seemed very much at home. Other singers followed, some of them clever. Hector settled down to enjoy himself. It was much more amusing than going back to his lonely room—especially with a pleasant companion by his side.

The entertainment finished up with a quaint and wildly funny shadow show, in which policemen, *cocottes*, *vieux marcheurs*, *midinettes*, the portly President of the Republic and all the other inhabitants of the weekly comic papers chased each other in fantastic attitudes across a lighted screen. It caused roars of laughter, in which Hector found himself joining heartily.

III

He was sorry when the show was over, and they trooped outside with the rest. The wide street was blazing with light and alive with people. Montmartre was just beginning its evening.

"Where shall we go next, Marcelle?" he asked, almost gaily. "Come, you know this world, and I don't."

"*Ma foi*, there are twenty places. But they are all much the same. You sit at a table and watch the dancing, and at some of them you have to buy champagne. It is expensive."

"Then we will buy champagne," he cried. "It is good to be dissipated once in a while."

She laughed and slipped her arm through his.

"I don't think you would ever be very dissipated," she said. "But come along. We will find somewhere amusing."

He submitted again willingly to her leadership, entered a far more imposing doorway, and in a moment found himself being relieved of his coat and hat by a page-boy in scarlet, all covered with gold buttons. They walked up a thickly carpeted staircase into a large room where there were flashing lights, a red-coated orchestra and a sprinkling of smart people in evening dress, sitting at supper tables under the glow of shaded electric lights.

The scene after his long and melancholy seclusion stimulated him to gaiety and extravagance. After consultation with Marcelle he ordered *écrevisses*, with cold chicken and salad to follow, and a bottle of champagne.

Marcelle commented gaily on some of the people present, for his benefit, and he found that his education in the peculiar life of Montmartre was improving rapidly. As women do, she borrowed brilliance from the scene. He was charmed to see how pretty she looked, with her dark eyes flashing in her animated face.

They pledged each other merrily over a glass of champagne.

"To my poor little cousin from the Provinces," she said.

"To my charming cousin of Paris," he replied, and they laughed happily together.

Supper was a success, and Hector completed it with a cigar. He felt a sense of ease and happiness that he had not known, it seemed, for an age. So much could a little congenial companionship do for a man. His whole being relaxed. He sunned himself in the general gaiety

and cheerfulness that surrounded him. Factitious, make-believe, it might be, but it was better than the gloom and self-communing of the past weeks. Why make life a tragedy? He regretted that he was so indifferent a dancer. Otherwise he would have seized Marcelle and joined the whirling and posturing couples in the middle of the room. Those people, at any rate, know how to make the best of life.

Marcelle at that moment gripped his arm in some excitement.

"You are in luck," she said. "Here comes somebody worth looking at. You have heard of Lina Bernay, of course. There she is, just coming in. Doesn't she look adorable. Ah, the luck of some people!"

Her words seemed to petrify him. He could hardly bring himself to look, but she was urging his attention in that direction. He saw a party of four just entering the room. Lina was saying something laughingly to her companion, a slight pretty dark woman. They made a striking picture together, but Lina outshone her companion. Behind them were two men, one of whom Hector recognized at once as de Bac. The other was a man of fifty or more, short and stocky—a touch even of *embon-point*—with jet black, closely-cropped, beard and moustache and a very dark complexion. The party sat down at a table reserved for them, from which, much to Hector's relief, he felt he was not likely to be observed. But for greater precaution he bent low over the table, and drew in front of him the silver ice-bucket with its protruding champagne bottle.

"Look, there, at that dress she has on," Marcelle was saying breathlessly. "Isn't it perfect? I know one of those men with her. The dark one with the beard. He was in our *salons* the other day with an *amie* who was buying a lot of things. I forget his name but he is a Brazilian and enormously rich, enormously.* Ah, these

actresses. There's nothing a woman like that can't have for the asking."

She was greatly excited, and now for the first time turned towards Hector since the entry of the party. She exclaimed at the sight of his face.

"But what is the matter! Are you ill? You look terrible."

Hector tried to pull himself together.

"It is nothing. I was feeling a little faint for the moment. It is very hot in here."

"Yes, and then the champagne. Perhaps . . ."

"On the contrary, Marcelle, that's just what I do want." He filled his glass and took a long draught at it.

She kept her eyes on him. She was genuinely concerned.

"You look a little better now. But a moment ago you were pale—dreadful. You feel all right?"

"Yes. It has quite passed off . . . Some more of this?"

"No, if it does you good, you drink it. I have enough here."

She continued her chatter about Lina. Everybody said that she was very *sérieuse*; that she would have nothing to do with men, although many wanted her; that she would not grant any favours even to this enormously rich Brazilian, who was supposed to be sighing for her . . . One would say so, by the way he was looking at her.

"Of course one never knows," she went on. "But I believe it really is true of her. You know the story about her, don't you? I knew it long ago. We hear all about these things at Roger's."

Hector was only half-conscious of her chatter, but this aroused his attention.

"I know nothing of these things," he said. "What was the story?"

She told him about Lucien Delage, delighted at being

able to impart such an interesting piece of information. And how since then Lina had been unapproachable, so that she was somebody quite unique in the world of the Paris theatres.

He found himself thrilled by this. And amazingly comforted. What a woman! It was just what he would have thought of her. And yet she had been one of the band who had organized themselves to crucify him, and was sitting with one of them now!

He could not understand it.

All this had become a dream. The lights, the crashing orchestra, the moving dancers, the champagne which had gone to his head, and this amazing encounter that had come to him. *She* was sitting over there, with de Bac of all men . . . And a Brazilian millionaire! His head was a whirl of emotions; anger and hate . . . and jealousy! Hate for the famous de Bac and jealousy for a Brazilian millionaire!

And at the thought of this he laughed to himself, bitterly. Worse than anything else he was ridiculous. He was as far removed from that party of four as any man in Paris could be. There beauty and distinction and wealth, and here Hector Duval of Lepetit's hairdressing establishment, sitting drinking an adventurous bottle of champagne in company with Marcelle.

He poured out the last of the champagne and drank it. Marcelle was watching him again.

"Perhaps we had better go," she said.

"As you wish," he replied.

He paid the waiter but lingered a little. Nobody was dancing at the moment, and he might be seen. The floor filled up again gradually, and he rose quickly and walked to the door, with Marcelle following him.

Out in the street again he felt dizzy. She put her arm through his with an affectionate gesture.

"You are certainly not well," she said. "My room is close by. Come with me and sit down a bit. I will make you a cup of tea, if you wish—I make excellent tea. Do you ever drink tea? It is a wonderful thing if one is feeling ill. One of our clients, an English lady, told me about it."

He turned with her into a side street. She rang the bell and a door opened to them. They climbed flights of stairs which seemed interminable. She opened a door, produced matches and lit a gas jet. He found himself in a clean and pleasant room. There were pictures from the illustrated weeklies neatly tacked on the wall and a comfortable couch on which she had made him sit down.

"I have a kitchen too, just through there," she said proudly. "A moment to light the gas stove and I will soon have a cup of tea."

He sat there hardly knowing what he was thinking, there was so much going on inside his head. She returned in a very short time with a steaming cup, filled with a pale liquid.

He took it and sipped it, not wanting it or liking it, but not wanting to refuse. They both regarded the tea as a medicine.

She sat down on the floor crouched at his feet, looking upwards. She took one of his hands and smiled sympathetically.

"You are not well," she said. "And more you are unhappy."

"It is possible," he said with a weary smile.

She squeezed his hand gently.

"Say then. You are alone in Paris. I am alone. We must be comrades . . . I think we should be happy with each other."

"It is very nice of you, Marcelle. I should like to."

"Kiss me," she exclaimed impulsively.

He bent down and kissed her. But it was on the cheek—a friendly and quite respectful kiss.

She leaned back on her elbow and looked up at him quizzingly, with a half smile on her lips.

"Yes, I knew you had something on your mind. You were thinking of something else even when you kissed me. It was not the kiss . . . of one who would be a lover."

He looked down at her gravely.

"Perhaps it is as you say, Marcelle. And I am very provincial, as you see. But I have been very happy with you to-night, much happier than I have been for a long time. I hope we shall be comrades, good comrades, and see each other often. You are the only friend I have in Paris."

"Good, then. Good comrades, eh? Here's my hand on it."

He took it, and imprinted a kiss on it with all the dignity of a *grand seigneur*. Then he stood up and looked round for his hat.

"And now, Marcelle, I must be going. It is very late, and we both have business to attend to in the morning." He looked at his watch. "It is nearly two o'clock."

She stood up also, and laughed in a way that puzzled him.

"You are so grave," she said, "so reserved and dignified. Truly, one can see that you have not been long in Paris. But it is very nice—in its way. To-morrow night, then. We meet at the café?"

HECTOR DUVAL

"I shall be there as usual. We will sit at the same table, if you wish."

"But certainly. Of course we shall." She laughed again. "Oh, how serious you are. Till to-morrow night, then. Kiss me again."

She held up her cheek. He saluted it with the same grave friendliness and then turned to the door.

CHAPTER XII

I

DURING the week or so following on his meeting with Marcelle, Hector found life in Paris much more tolerable. She was in every way a good comrade, and at the end of the day he had something to look forward to.

They met nearly every evening, and under her guidance he saw a good deal of the life of Paris. Throughout their companionship she insisted, except on very rare occasions when the privilege of the male could not be denied, on paying her share. Hector had objected strongly to this at first, but she was very firm.

"Obviously it must be so," she had said with overpowering logic. "I know what you earn at your hairdresser's shop. It is probably not much more than I earn myself. Perhaps not so much. So if I didn't pay my share we couldn't go about together. . . . And especially as we are merely comrades!"

Even Hector, unversed as he was in the ways of the world, could not entirely ignore that their partnership was—for Montmartre especially—on a very unusual basis. Montmartre does not bother about platonic friendships, finding that in such matters it is much more simple to begin at the end. But he was quite satisfied with their acquaintance as it was, and did not desire to intensify it in any way. And his own strange personality was a very effective shield for him.

Marcelle found quite natural in this grave, serious man from the provinces what she would have found unnatural in anybody else. She would gladly have welcomed any sign of a more sentimental or passionate bond between them. But he was what he was, and for the time being she accepted him at that. He was not a lover, but she found her instincts partly satisfied in mothering him. To her Hector was still the raw visitor from the far-off South, amazingly ignorant of the life of Paris, and with every need for being looked after. She felt that she was performing good deeds in a wicked world.

But as time passed Hector was conscious of a growing uneasiness with regard to affairs down at St. Médard. Now that the first stunning shock of his trouble had passed from him he found that his thoughts were often busy with those he had left behind. What would they think of him? They had never heard a word since the day he left, amid joy and acclamation, to receive the homage of Paris! Bitter as this thought always was to him he felt that he could not leave them in entire ignorance of what had happened to him. There was also the question of his barber's shop. Paillasse was doubtless in a considerable state of agitation at his *patron's* long absence.

But above all he longed to see Dr. Lemoine and tell him, alone, of what had happened. He knew that the good Doctor must be in a state of great bewilderment as to what had become of his protégé. Hector had thought of writing to him, but found it impossible to compose a satisfactory letter. And now more and more the desire came over him to pay a secret visit to the Doctor, explain everything, and ask his advice as to how far the rest of St. Médard should be acquainted with the facts of the case.

It became an obsession. It was as though the mists had cleared away from his mind and that at last he

realized where his duty lay. He finally decided that at all costs he must go, whatever M. Lepetit thought about it.*

II

The decision, and its announcement to Marcelle, did not come at the most opportune moment, but once having made up his mind he told her of his intention at once.

He was sitting facing her across a little table beneath the trees, outside a small restaurant—a *guinguette*—up in the woods above St. Cloud. It was a perfect Sunday evening, following a very warm day of spring, and they had spent the afternoon together, coming down the river from Paris on one of the swift little steamboats.

Their meal was just over, and they had both voted it a great success—gudgeon fresh from the Seine, chicken and salad, some Brie cheese and a bottle of passable red wine. It was the sort of dinner they could hardly escape on a Sunday evening near the Seine, but they had both found it excellent and were well pleased.

To Marcelle, bathed in the pure content of the moment, it seemed that only one thing was lacking to transform it into bliss. It was a scene which to a Parisienne of her class gave the highest expression of the joy of life. The trees in their earliest green and the open air; the relaxation and comfort of a good dinner in the cool of an evening following a day of hot sunshine; the companionship of a man whom she felt was superior to any of those around her, or indeed to any man she had ever met, barber or not—all this was perfect in its way. It needed only one thing to make it ecstasy; that he should be less of the comrade and more of the lover.

*Everything in the scene inspired romance and love. The light had gone out of the sky, and there was a

deep blue above the tree-tops. In and about the little restaurant twinkling lights had appeared, but the diners outside were bathed in a warm and languorous dusk. Inside the restaurant, empty of diners, a mechanical piano was playing, and a few couples were dancing to its ancient melodies, delivered painfully, with uneasy, staccato pauses, and sudden rushes. But the music seemed to blend very well into all the rest, and the figures of the dancers, passing and repassing the open doorway, completed the perfection of the scene.

Hector, amid all this, sat smoking a small and cheap cigar of the kind known as a *demi Londres*. He had been very quiet for some time, and she had noticed that he was gazing into the distance as though his thoughts were far away. A strange and baffling man, she felt. They must have looked as ideally happy as any of the other couples seated near them. But many of these diners were openly displaying their affection, and Marcelle was aware of this with envy in her heart. He never even thought of kissing her. And now, as she could see, he was thinking of anything but her.

Hector's far-away gaze, indeed, was looking through not only space but time. He was contemplating that scene on the platform when all St. Médard was gathered to see him off on his triumphal journey.

He suddenly announced his decision.

"I am going away for a little while, Marcelle."

The news broke in most disagreeably on her thoughts. She stared at him, startled.

"Where to? When? For how long?" She fired these queries at him all in a breath.

"Down to the South. Not for very long. Perhaps a week at the most."

"But your *patron*," she inquired, looking immediately for difficulties in his way. "Has he consented?"

"No, but he will have to, because I must go."

"But why all this urgency? You have never mentioned it before. Is there anything the matter?"

"No, not really the matter. But there are . . . family affairs which must be attended to."

She sighed heavily.

"*Mon ami*, what a man of mystery you are. You've never told me where you come from. And now you announce suddenly—like that," she gave a rapid and expressive gesture, "that you are going away. It isn't nice of you."

"Nevertheless, Marcelle, I shall have to go," he insisted quietly.

She suddenly bent forward eagerly.

"Tell me, there is one thing I have always wanted to ask you . . . Are you married?"

He smiled a little grimly and shook his head.

"No, dear friend, I am not married. There is no Madame Hector Duval."

She gave a despairing gesture.

"Ah, I give it up. It is too mysterious."

"I assure you, Marcelle, there is really nothing to tell. What little there is that might interest you I promise to tell you some day. But not now. It is too banal—and I am not in the mood."

"A woman?" she inquired.

He shook his head. She knew him well enough not to insist further. She changed her tactics.

"Tell me," she said, speaking in the familiar second person, "dost thou love me a little, just a little?" She bent nearer towards him over the table, and squeezed his arm with an affectionate gesture.

He considered a moment before replying.

"Dear Marcelle, it is difficult to say what love is, is it not? . . . But I feel that we are the best of comrades, the very best. You have been very kind to me and are very dear to me."

"Ah, *comrades!*" She spoke the word with disdain, and drew back suddenly, chilled. "What is comradeship? That is an affair for men only." She sighed again. "And I feel somehow that you will not come back from this journey."

"But that is absurd, Marcelle. I must come back, and it will be very soon."

"No! I feel that you won't come back, or that something will happen. Something important. I feel it. There is something that tells me this journey means a great deal."

"It cannot mean anything between us," he assured her. "When I return things will be just the same as before. I merely have to go away for a little while to settle some affairs—business affairs."

She shook her head dolorously.

"I know it. I feel it," she insisted.

She was obviously on the verge of tears. Distressed, he tried to reassure and console her. But his efforts were not very effective. They were patient and kind and earnest, but to Marcelle they lacked all conviction. A kiss would have transformed her, and banished her curious fears of what this journey would mean. But that did not enter into his conception of things.

It was a very depressed Marcelle who a little later rose from the table. She spoke very little on the boat on the way back—an interminable journey, as it seemed, zig-zagging across the Seine from one landing stage to another.

The same restraint was on them as they stood outside her door at Montmartre.

"Will you come up for a little while?" she asked.

It was the last thing he wanted, in his mood. He hated to admit it to himself, but he wished to deposit Marcelle and be alone.

"If you will excuse me," he said.

She sighed.

"To-morrow night?" she queried.

He considered for a few moments.

"To-morrow is Monday. I must get away on Tuesday morning, very early. Or it may have to be late to-morrow night. I must find out the trains." He paused again.

Her finger pressed the bell, and the door clicked open before them, released from inside by the cord pulled by a sleepy concierge.

"Good night, and *bon voyage*, dear friend."

She stepped inside, and with another click the door had shut behind her. He stared, surprised. He hated her to leave him like that.

Women were curious creatures he thought, as he walked on up the hill. It would have been very nice and convenient if he could have loved Marcelle. She was such a good comrade in all other ways. But how could a man pretend these things when he didn't feel them?

The Doctor had said he would find his ideal in Paris. That had proved to be true. But it was so ideal that it was too ridiculous and fantastic to think of. Yet it had power enough over him to make it impossible for him to respond to the advances of any other woman.

Poor Marcelle! He would try to make it up to her when he returned in a few days.

CHAPTER XIII

I

HECTOR's interview with M. Lepetit in making his request for leave was comparatively brief, but it was effective.

M. Lepetit was at first quite disinclined to grant the request. The *salon* was very busy, he said, and Hector's loss would be felt. It could not be done. No, decidedly no.

But Hector was so quietly firm about it, so gravely convinced that his absence for a short time was imperative, that M. Lepetit found himself being overborne. This employee had a personality that was difficult to deny.

"But this business must be very important, that you should wish to absent yourself like this," he exclaimed, struggling.

"It is. I have many affairs to settle. For one thing I want to arrange to sell my business. I had not been certain that I was going to settle down in Paris. Now I am sure."

M. Lepetit was impressed. It was a case, then, of one proprietor talking to another. He knew there was something different about this employee. Perhaps this explained it. Hector gave him some details, but did not give the name of his town. They embarked on technical matters.

"If you must go I suppose you must," said M. Lepetit at last. "But not more than a week, mind you, at the very outside. And you promise me that you return here."

"I will make it as much less than a week as I can. And I promise you that I shall return here."

"Good," said M. Lepetit, with an attempt to suggest that the decision had entirely rested with him. "But I do not like it. All the same I have a feeling that you may not come back here. Why should you, a proprietor yourself, remain an employee?"

Hector assured him that this was his intention. He had determined to leave his own town for ever. But he was struck by the coincidence that Marcelle and M. Lepetit had said exactly the same thing.

The last journey he had made had altered the whole course of his life. Could it be that this one also was to bring unexpected changes. He did not see how it possibly could. He might be different, but St. Médard would be just the same.

II

Throughout the long journey south his mind revolved round the coming interview with Dr. Lemoine. He would go direct to his house, and tell him the whole story. He felt sure that the Doctor's welcome would be the best thing that had happened to him since he adventured forth from St. Médard.

It was dark when he arrived there, and he knew how dimly lit the station would be. But all the same he dreaded the risk of discovery in passing the ticket collector, who had known him for years. Before leaving the train he had wrapped a muffler in such a way as to hide the lower part of his face. He also wore a soft felt hat, pulled low down over his brow, of a shape St. Médard had never seen. He breathed a sigh of relief when the man passed him through without a sign of recognition.

His heart beat tumultuously as he trod the well-known

streets again. The old town was always very quiet at night, and he chose by-ways where he was unlikely to meet anybody at all. But his route took him within sight of the *Calé du Commerce*. It was lighted up and he could see people sitting outside. He wondered who they were. How many times they must have discussed him during the past few weeks . . . But then all the town must have done that. M. Mercier and Henriette for instance. How they must have talked of him and wondered what his disappearance meant.

He arrived at the Doctor's house without any adventure, but as he walked across the small courtyard which led to the door he had a moment of panic at the thought that Dr. Lemoine might be out at the *cercle*.

Mariette, the Doctor's old maid, whom he had known for years, opened the door. He said in a voice he tried to disguise that he would like to see Dr. Lemoine. She ushered him into the dim waiting-room. But as he removed his hat she looked at him sharply.

"But it is Monsieur Duval," she almost shrieked.

Hector jumped.

"Hush, Mariette. Not a word that I am here, except to the Doctor."

But without paying further attention she rushed from the room crying "*Monsieur le Docteur*." He heard her rap at a door, which opened, and the voice of Mariette crying "Come!" followed by sounds of protestation from the Doctor. But a moment later she appeared in the doorway again, dragging the Doctor with her. Much is permitted French *domestiques* of long service, and Mariette had taken full advantage of her privileges.

With one striking gesture she thrust out her disengaged hand in the direction of Hector and cried:

"Look who is here!"

"Thunder of God!" cried Dr. Lemoine. He seemed

all eyes. Then he came forward to Hector and with an impulsive movement kissed him on both cheeks.

Even in his condition Hector could find room for a little mild surprise at the startling warmth and excitement of his reception. But astounding things were to follow. The Doctor as well as Mariette had a sense of the dramatic. He seized him by the arm, and with the words "Come with me, my boy!" dragged him out of the room.

The Doctor entered his study a fraction of a second sooner than his captive. But in that infinitesimal space of time he was able to cry out:

"Look who is here!"

And swung forward by the Doctor's impetuous progress Hector found himself looking into the face of Lina Bernay.

"Oh!" he exclaimed weakly, and felt as though his legs would give way beneath him.

She rose from her chair, amazement and—was he right in fancying it?—joy in her eyes. And then she thrust out her hand with the words:

"Thank God! How glad I am to see you again."

Hector took her hand in his. He tried to say something, but could find nothing to say. He gazed blankly into her face. It was too overwhelming to see her there. It was like crashing music, full of great harmonies and mighty discords; a tumult of suddenly remembered emotions; loneliness and despair; his hate for men who had made a victim of him; Brazilian millionaires and the power of wealth; the absurd dreams of an outcast permitting himself an impossible adoration.

And now she was here—here in St. Médard!

He dropped her hand, sank down on a chair near him and buried his face in his hands. He felt the Doctor's grip on his shoulder.

"Listen, my young friend. Wait, I will give you something to drink." In no time as it seemed the Doctor was holding something to his mouth.

"No, no," said Hector, waving it away. He had been weak enough.

"Drink!" cried the Doctor imperiously. "I say, drink. It will do you good." He was not to be balked of one atom of the proper emotions due to this amazing situation.

Hector obeyed. And he felt better for it. He stood up again.

"Pardon," he said. "It is too amazing. I . . . Ah, no, it is too much."

"Sit down again!" cried the Doctor, pushing him back into his chair. "*Tenez!* A cigarette. Madame will permit, I am sure." He handed Hector a case, and produced a box of matches. "And for the time being, silence. You shall speak in a moment."

There was quiet for a little space, and Hector puffed meekly at his cigarette, looking at the floor. Then the Doctor spoke again.

"Madame, with your permission I will explain all."

Lina smiled her agreement. She too had a sense of the dramatic, and she knew what this scene must mean to the good Doctor. Not for anything would she have robbed him of the pure joy of what she divined was to be one of the greatest moments in his life. And she too sufficiently felt the emotion and surprise of this amazing encounter to be glad to be relieved of any necessity for speech.

"Then I will be as brief as possible. Listen, my dear Hector.

"Only during the past hour have I heard from this gracious lady of what happened to you in Paris. Until then nobody in all St. Médard had heard a word of you since you departed. It was a mystery. We had discussed it and turned it over a thousand times. And every day we hoped to have news. But though daily we have

searched the Paris papers, not a word have we been able to glean as to what happened to you.

"Hardly more than an hour ago this lady was announced. You can imagine my surprise, my gratification, when I knew that I was receiving in my house one of the brightest ornaments of the Parisian stage." He paused for an instant to address a polite inclination in the direction of Lina, which she acknowledged with a smile.

"From her I learned of the cruel fortune which befel our fellow-citizen on his arrival in Paris. I learned how that wonderful banquet about which we were all so proud was merely so much . . . but enough. We will pass on from an exhibition of such cruelty, such callous disregard for the feelings of others. And I learned from this lady how she, to her grief and horror, assisted at the tragedy of that scene.

"She fled from it, bitterly reproaching herself—though I permit myself to say that the fault was in no way hers—for having lent herself to such a parade of cynicism. Every day afterwards she inquired for news of you, but although every search was made no trace of you could be found. Then came to her your bundle of manuscripts—plays which I am proud to say were written in this town. She read them, or some of them, and then hoped she would hear further from you. But the days and weeks passed, and no further sign. At the banquet she had heard you, I am pleased to say, speak of me. Yesterday only she determined to come and see me, as a last measure before approaching the police to try to find you.

"She left Paris yesterday in her car, travelled easily, stayed a night on the way, and arrived here this evening, hoping that I might have news of you. Alas, I can only say that I have never had a sign of life from you since the day you left this town. And behold, but a few moments ago you too arrive in my house. I am dragged

out of the room. I drag you in. And . . . *Enfin, c'est fantastique!* "

Here the Doctor stopped. He felt that it was a fitting climax to a first act.

Hector raised his head and looked at Lina.

"Madame, I am overwhelmed . . . I hardly know how to thank you for your kindness . . . your sympathy . . ."

"Monsieur Duval . . . believe me, if I could only . . ."

Her voice was sweetest music. But the Doctor broke in again. He was ready for the second act, and he was not to be denied.

"There is more to be told. Madame read one of your plays. She likes it. She is enthusiastic about it. And what is more"—the Doctor's voice became tremendously impressive—"she is going to produce it, and as soon as possible."

It was a short second act, but it was a very good one.

Hector raised his head again. He looked from one to the other dazedly.

"But . . . but . . ."

"Yes, my friend. She is going to produce it. Fame shall not be denied you. And your revenge shall be complete."

"But . . . ah, my God, I cannot believe it!" cried Hector. "But which one? Which? My tragedy of *Holofernes*?"

"Tragedy, my friend, tragedy! Nothing of the kind! What does the brightest comedienne of Paris want with tragedies! Tragedy, no! Your comedy—your comedy written from life in this very town."

"My comedy . . . my poor little comedy."

"Poor little comedy! On the contrary, I am told, by one who should know, that it will take Paris by storm, that it is something new, a breath from the provinces

which will electrify jaded Parisians. . . . In short, that it will be a great success."

Hector put his hand to his head with a gesture that was eloquent of his state of mind.

The thread of the Doctor's drama had been badly broken, but he made a brave effort to put matters right, and bring his discourse back again within the bounds of the dramatic unities.

"Further, all this had to be done in the greatest secrecy. Not until the first performance is over will it be known who is the author. Not a soul, here or in Paris, is to know. Madame has had to fight hard to attain her end. She has had to overcome great opposition to produce a play by one who is unknown. She has had to vanquish great obstacles, prejudices, jealousies. For a time she despaired. Everything seemed to conspire against her. But she overcame everything.

"Within a month the play will be produced, and the greatest star in Paris will herself appear in the leading rôle. Within a month Hector Duval and St. Médard will be famous. And it will be justice. For not only will one who is destined to be famous be acclaimed for the first time by the great world, but those who would have cast him into the bottomless pit of misery and despair will be confounded, and see their evil work recoil on them."

There was silence as the Doctor finished. He had really been most impressive, and all three—the Doctor included—were held by the spell of his eloquence and emotion. The silence was again broken by the Doctor.

"Have I said all there is to say, Madame?"

"All, Monsieur le Docteur. And most admirably, most eloquently. You have moved me most deeply by your discourse."

The Doctor bowed. It was the proudest, the most glorious moment in his life.

"Madame, praise from you is a happiness I had never hoped to experience."

There came a sigh from Hector. With one swift movement he had knelt before Lina, taking one of her hands in his and kissing it passionately.

"How can I thank you," he murmured over it, "how can I thank you?"

The Doctor looked down on the wonderful scene, and rubbed his hands. His cup of bliss was overflowing.

"*Mon Dieu*, to think," he exclaimed ecstatically, "to think . . . *sapristi* . . . that this should have happened in St. Médard, and what is more . . . name of a name . . . in my own house!"

CHAPTER XIV

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I

A *répétition générale* at the Etoile Theatre was always one of the outstanding events of the Paris season.

The Etoile was the oldest, dingiest and most uncomfortable theatre in Paris. It had cramped boxes with folding wooden *grilles* which might have been copied from an Eastern harem. It had many seats from which only a tiny fragment of the stage could be seen. It had only one exit, so that the process of emptying it took half an hour or more, and heaven only knows what would have happened had there ever been a fire. Its *ouvreuses*, the elderly, plain and hard-featured females who showed people to their places, were reputed to be the most rapacious of a race noted for its rapacity. It dated back to Napoleonic times, and had never been altered in any way since those days. It was popularly said that it received its last coat of paint during the time of Louis Phillipe.

But with all these things the Etoile remained the Etoile, and there was none other to compare with it. It had tradition. It had *chic*. Round the Etoile hung a nimbus of glory which nothing could dissipate. Its comedies were supposed to be the sprightliest, the acting of its companies the most finished, of all Paris. This was by no means always true, but the mirage of a great tradition glossed over all deficiencies. To come out of the Etoile with the

slightest feeling of dissatisfaction would have been to deny all that was best in the *esprit Parisien*.

And to be one of the select few invited to make up the audience at a dress rehearsal at the Etoile was a distinction and a privilege beyond price. It was, of its kind, a social function without a rival. All who mattered—*le tout* Paris—were to be seen there. Cabinet Ministers—and ex-Cabinet Ministers—were numbered by the dozen. Great artists talked to famous writers. There were beautiful women, not all of whom were clever, and ugly women, some of whom were. And any wandering prince or monarch who happened to be passing through the capital was sure to be found in one of the boxes.

The spirit of a great past hovered over every first night at the Etoile. A hundred years of Parisian history had been played out in this auditorium with its tarnished gold and faded crimson. It was a history rich in episodes—stories of courtesans of great renown; stories of love and jealousy; of patrimonies squandered; of impetuous youth and foolish old age; of the amours of great princes; of fire-eating duellists provoking a bloody encounter for a misdirected glance or an ambiguous smile. The Etoile had passed through periods of real glory during which many of the most sparkling comedies of France had been given to the world. But all that its stage had ever accomplished in brilliance and variety was as nothing compared with the eternal human comedy which had been played out before its footlights.

II

And on this particular first night there was, mingled with the usual elation and effervescence of such an occasion, a keen spirit of curiosity as to what the new piece was to be like. It was enveloped in mystery. The

author was anonymous—a most unusual thing at the Etoile, or anywhere else. The comedy itself had been produced* with great secrecy. It was said that Lina Bernay was exceedingly enthusiastic about it; that she had forced its acceptance on Descouvres, the Director, and had only obtained her way after threatening to resign and take another theatre; that Descouvres had compromised by saying that if she produced the play she must guarantee it financially; that the divine Lina had easily done this by going to her Brazilian millionaire friend, Senhor de Roza, who would gladly do more than that for her; that various other authors, especially that little fop Arnaud, were furious at what Lina had done . . . and a hundred other *potins* and rumours besides.

The old house was tremulous with a thousand conversations. Though it was already nearly half an hour beyond the time for the raising of the curtain people were still coming in, knowing from a lifetime of experience that there was no danger of being late. Bows, smiles, hand-shakes and hand-waves were being exchanged. Opera glasses were busy. *Le tout Paris* was examining itself, and saying things about itself that were very old but always new.

It was generally remarked that before one of the boxes near the stage the wooden, lattice *grille* was drawn, hiding whoever was inside the box from the gaze of all others. This was unusual on a first night. People came not only to see, but to be seen. It was felt that here lay the heart of the mystery. The house, indeed, came to the unanimous conclusion that behind that intriguing wooden lattice sat the author of the piece. But who was he?

The chatter of the house was suddenly arrested by an unmistakable sound from behind the curtain. The *régisseur* had delivered on the stage boards the three classic and magistral blows with his club which heralded the immediate rise of the curtain. His signal was only three-

quarters of an hour late. That was not so bad, for a first night. The lights sank, and amid a perfect silence the curtain rose on the mysterious comedy.

III

There was no doubt about the verdict of *le tout Paris*. It had taken "Juliette Shows the Way" to its heart.

This simple story of quaint shades of social differences in some out-of-the-way spot in the provinces had captured the audience. They, the polished and scintillating representatives of all that was best in Paris, felt that they were behaving nicely, were uttering a becoming benediction, in thus blessing a homely tale of people who were so far removed from them. They had looked on the interiors of people who kept small shops and seen them at home; what they did, how they spoke, how they dressed and how they regarded the quaint world in which they lived. And it was delicious to see Lina Bernay, most *mondaine* of comedy actresses, playing the part of a daughter of the provinces in a world as far removed from Paris as Madagascar.

A warm welcome was always to be expected on the night of a *répétition générale*. People who had been invited gratis to see somebody else's play could do no less than greet it politely. But here the unmistakable note of sincerity made itself heard. The applause for the final curtain, long held in restraint, manifested itself as a crash. The uninterrupted roll of handclapping, above which rose the insistent roar of "Bravo! Bravo!" from many quarters, was of the quality and volume that intoxicates the hearts of a theatrical company.

But who was the author? That was the question now.

A figure came before the curtain—that of Bussy, the *doyen* of the Etoile company. Ah, now they would know

at last. The classic form of announcement of the authorship of a new piece was as a rule only a pretty comedy. But on this occasion it would really tell them something.

There was silence as Bussy made to speak.

"Mesdames, Messieurs," he began, "the play which we have had the honour to present to you this evening is by . . ."

He made a distinct pause before the name. The house seemed to reach forward in its eagerness to hear.

". . . Monsieur Hector Duval."

IV

So there it was at last! The secret was out! A thousand tongues began to wag on the instant. And nearly all were uttering exactly the same thing. The play was by M. Hector Duval. Good. But who, who in the name of the Devil, was Hector Duval? Nobody—or only a very few—had ever heard of him.

And then as the audience slowly and painfully broke up, squeezing through the narrow passages between the seats and into the inadequate gangways, an amazing rumour ran round.

The play had been written by a barber!

There was laughter, at first, at this. The thing was incredible. Somebody was playing a joke.

But gradually the rumour expanded and gathered new details unto itself. Those who heard fresh details passed them on to those behind. The fortunate people who had reached the vestibule stayed there to discuss the wonder. Thus those who were still in the auditorium found themselves unable to advance further. They had to stand where they were, wedged uncomfortably between the rows of seats or in the gangways, and snatch eagerly at such

news as was wafted back to them. It was an absurd situation, but it was not lacking in excitement.

In the vestibule a rapt, intensely interested crowd was pressing round a tall, fat man, who apparently held the key to the whole mystery.

"I tell you I was there at the banquet in his honour," he was saying. "We pretended he was a great poet, and brought him up from the country to fête him. It was intended to be a delicious joke. But it all went wrong, and ended tragically. You never saw a man so upset when he discovered that the whole thing was a *blague*. He took it like a thunderbolt. He collapsed, then he disappeared. We tried to find him, but he had vanished. I'd forgotten his existence. And now the next thing we hear is this. It is fantastic."

"But how did he get his play on, Lepelletier?" asked somebody.

"Ask Lina Bernay," replied the fat man. "I know nothing. She has managed the whole thing. By the beard of the President of the Republic, I see it now! Revenge! She was mixed up in the affair at the banquet, and she was very much upset at the way it all turned out. That is it. She has done it to lift up the barber again—and mind you, he is no ordinary man. An extraordinary type. He might be anything. And she has done all this in secrecy, so as to turn the tables on us all. What a woman! I can see Arnaud's face—now that he knows his own play had to make room for the barber's." And Lepelletier burst into a roar of laughter at the idea.

So the extraordinary news spread. The people who lingered stubbornly in the vestibule were gradually, by the insistent pressure of those behind, pushed out of the doors on to the Boulevard. But there they still lingered, talking, exclaiming, laughing, and as the theatre slowly emptied the crowd before it increased. Nobody desired to leave the scene of such a palpitating affair. And on

every hand was heard the word "Revenge!" It was a delicious idea—*une histoire bien parisienne* it ever there was one.

v

Nowhere did the startling announcement from the stage cause so much emotion as in a box occupied by a number of friends of Lina Bernay—Roger de Bac, the playwright; Senhor de Roza, the Brazilian millionaire, who it was generally known was anxious to lay his riches at the feet of Lina; and Gustave Arnaud, who as the new comedy progressed from success to triumph had grown moodier and moodier. A curse on it!

To him the announcement of the name of the author came as a bombshell. He turned livid at the shock, and did not attempt to hide his feelings.

"Ah-h!" he cried tragically to de Bac, his emotions too violent to allow of any concealment. "Why did I not think of it before! Idiot that I have been! So that was her secret!"

"It is incredible," murmured de Bac. "She has made us all look fools. But what a pretty revenge for our barber. By Jove! What a pretty revenge! In some ways I am not sorry to welcome him to the ranks of dramatists. He has earned it. . . . And the play was good. There is no doubt of that."

"But what about me!" cried Arnaud furiously. "Think how she has deceived me! She told me she had a play by an anonymous author. I did not dream it was the barber. She knew we were trying to find him. And yet she keeps it all a secret, and springs it on us like this! It is infamous!"

"Do not take it so tragically," said de Bac, who had not the same reasons for being angry. "We have brought

it on ourselves. I remember he told me that he had written several plays, and asked me to read them. Naturally I did not take the idea seriously." "

"Anyhow, the advantage decidedly rests with the barber," said the Brazilian gently, who was familiar with the story of Hector's banquet. There was a twinkle in his dark eyes. He seemed to be enjoying the situation.

Arnaud exploded again at this, and turned on him.

"So it seems," he cried viciously. "And you, de Roza, in backing up Lina's enterprise have helped to make some of us look precious fools. But it is Lina who is to blame. Yes, it is a sort of revenge she has taken on us because of the trick we played on that fellow. 'Poor fellow,' she was always calling him." He mimicked the tones of feminine sympathy. "It all comes back to me now—how upset she was. How blind I have been! What a fool! *Diable*, one would almost say she loved him the way she was always asking for news of him after he disappeared."

The Brazilian laughed—a deep contented laugh.

"A barber! No, I should not think our dear Lina has behaved from any such motive as that. But come. Is it not time to go behind? I have heard so much of this wonderful individual that I am impatient to look on him at last."

Arnaud bounded.

"My God! Of course! I had not thought of that. It is he who has been behind that *grille* all this evening. And no doubt the famous author is even now on the stage receiving congratulations. Ha, ha!" He laughed derisively. "This is more comic than any comedy ever written. Ah, if I had only guessed what game she was playing with me. There would have been no barber's play at this theatre."

Down below in the corridor Arnaud chafed and raged at their delay in getting to the stage. They were caught

in the press of people struggling to get out, and from all sides he was badgered by demands for information.

By the time they reached the door giving access to the stage Arnaud was in a state bordering on frenzy. They found the stage already full of people—the usual privileged gathering after a *répétition générale*, come to press their congratulations on everybody concerned.

Arnaud pushed his way to the centre. Lina was standing there, still in the simple frock she had worn in the last act. She seemed to be speaking and smiling to twenty people at once. And by her side stood Hector, his face flushed with the triumph of the moment, and his eyes alight, but dignified and impressive with it all, and looking exceedingly well in his new dress suit.

Another dress suit! Arnaud thought of the one he had seen cast aside in the hotel bedroom, but the thought did not soften him.

His lips trembled with anger as he faced Lina.

"So this was your secret—you and your anonymous author!" he murmured harshly, with what was intended to be bitter and scathing reproach.

She included him in her all-embracing smile, and blandly ignored his attitude.

"You have met Monsieur Duval before," she said, with the slightest stress on the first word.

Arnaud found himself standing before the much taller figure of the new dramatist. At that moment he would have given a considerable part of the fortune left him by his excellent father, the biscuit manufacturer, to be able to conjure up some flashing epigram, some rapier thrust of wit, which would have enabled him, a Parisian of the Parisians, to dominate this extraordinary situation. Men had been annihilated by a single word. But to his mortification no cutting phrase leaped to his rescue. It was Hector who spoke first.

"Yes, we have met once before." His voice was toneless, and he made a stiff little bow.

Arnaud realized that something was required of him; that for his own sake something must be said. He could not allow it to be repeated that he had shown his chagrin in public before this extraordinary upstart.

"I must congratulate you," he managed to utter in conventional tones. "It was a surprise we did not expect." He turned away abruptly, unable to trust himself further.

De Bac was much more master of the situation. He may have been as active as Arnaud in the plot to ridicule the poet-barber, but he had long regretted it. He recognized that it was a moment to grasp the nettle firmly, and went up boldly, his hand outstretched.

"My dear confrère, we meet again, under happier circumstances. It was magnificent. Lina was adorable. Let me thank you for one of the most amusing evenings I have spent for a long, long time."

Something seemed to smoulder in Hector's eye. This was the impossible moment, or something like it, which he had often visualized. Before him stood one of the two men who in his mind had been most concerned in his humiliation. A thousand times he had hoped that Fate might some day give him the power to wither his tormentors. And here was de Bac standing with outstretched hand! But was this the moment? He knew that Lina's eyes were upon him. And it was she who had placed him there.

"I thank you," he said gravely, and took the hand held out to him.

He could not have said less. But he could not have said more. De Bac was a man of quick imagination and ready tongue, capable of meeting most emergencies in life. But he felt as he turned away that for once a situation had dominated him.

For hours, as it seemed to Hector, he stood there, bowing to distinguished people, shaking their hands, listening to words of congratulation and praise, and murmuring his thanks. The situation would have been impossible without the presence of Lina, who seemed to stand as a gracious bulwark between him and that terrifying thing known as *le tout Paris*. And another great source of moral support was Dr. Lemoine, who had come specially all the way from St. Médard to be present at the triumph of his young protégé, who had sat with him in the box behind that blessed protecting *grille*, and now stood at his elbow, heartening him with many a whispered observation.

VI

The climax for the new author came when a very elegant but very ancient old gentleman, still erect and tall despite the suggestion of feebleness in his walk, came forward. He wore a single eyeglass, with a broad black ribbon, and had striking snow-white side-whiskers, and carried a gold-knobbed cane.

"It is the Marquis de Malvoisin-Montigny," whispered Lina, as the famous old beau approached.

Hector knew of him, he had been so often written about. Whatever may have been thought of him once Paris was now proud of him as a relic. The Marquis was a very distinguished legacy of the Second Empire—the hero of innumerable adventures, amorous and otherwise, which had long outlasted his middle-age and persisted during what most people would have called advancing years. It was one of the Marquis's many boasts, indeed, that he had never attained years of discretion, and if he could help it, never would.

He had been a shining light at the Maison Dorée and

the Café Anglais in their palmiest and wildest days. It was common knowledge that he had attended every first night of importance in Paris for the past half century and more. He belonged to the old school which firmly believed that to be out of Paris was to be three-quarters dead. It was still his greatest pleasure to hover behind the scenes at the Opéra, and examine critically through his eyeglass the latest generation of dancers—he who had seen so many *corps de ballet* come and go.

He bent over Lina's hand and bestowed on her a graceful compliment for her performance that evening, and then turned to the author.

"Cher Maître," he piped, in a voice approaching a falsetto. "Permit me to congratulate you on your exquisite comedy."

To be addressed as "Master," though it might perhaps now be regarded as his due according to all the canons governing the world of the theatre, was too much for Hector. He flushed, shot a glance at Lina, and only with great difficulty stammered out some sort of reply.

The old beau engaged the author in conversation, and Lina looked on with a smile. It was certainly a moment for Hector to be thus talking on equal terms with the most famous old dandy in Paris.

And then her smile disappeared, and in her eyes appeared a look of amazement. She was looking at the two men, the young and the old, the barber and the Marquis, in profile. But for the old man's slight stoop they would have been of equal height. There was something similar in the general pose of their figures. But what aroused her amazement, what showed her the truth in a flash, was the striking likeness in their two profiles. They were not merely alike. They were the same.

She knew that she was looking at father and son.

She knew it beyond all doubt. It was not merely a surmise. To her, in that moment of keen perception,

the astonishing revelation came as unassailable truth. Once that revelation had come every other circumstance supported it. The career of the Marquis allowed amply for such a coincidence. And that air about Hector, the things he did and said, and the way he did them, was now explained. Her barber not only behaved like an aristocrat. He was one—or almost!

It is to be feared that in that intense moment of discovery Lina was in no sense depressed or shocked. She did not moralize on the reprehensible career of a wicked old exquisite, and its unexpected effects, nor muse on the tragedy of a young man born with instincts and attributes which were in crying discord with the existence and career Fate had apportioned him. She was only conscious of joy that her protégé, the man she had vowed to lift up again, was even more than she had thought him. The revelation of his origin justified, according to the most worldly of standards, all she had done. The last lurking fear of any suggestion of ridicule was instantly dissipated. Hector, she had long ago told herself, was a better man than any of his persecutors. He was even better than she herself thought him to be. Here was romance!

CHAPTER XV

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I

THE old exquisite, having finished with Hector, turned to Lina. He was very much in the dark about this new author, and desired information.

"Charming fellow," he said to her. "But who is he, this Hector Duval? Even when his name was announced from the stage I was no wiser. I said to myself: 'The play may be by Monsieur Hector Duval, but who is Monsieur Hector Duval?' I thought I knew my dramatic authors, new or old. And yet the name, somehow, seems familiar. Ought I to have heard of him?"

She wondered what would be the effect on him if she could only tell him. If she could simply say "Monsieur Hector Duval is your own son. Aren't you proud of him?" No doubt that even with a life so crowded as his had been she could provide him with the supreme shock of his existence. But however much the dramatic power and irony of the thought might appeal to her she had to enjoy it alone.

"Monsieur Duval," she said instead, "is quite unknown as an author. This is the first play he has had produced, although he has written a number of others. They are in verse. He is a poet, too. But he is better known in his own profession."

"And what is that, dear Madame?"

"He is a barber."

The old beau stared at her, then carefully adjusting his eyeglass turned and in the light of this new and surprising knowledge examined Hector critically. That done he turned once more to Lina, dropping his eyeglass.

"A barber! Amazing! He has such an air. I heard somebody saying something about a barber as I made my way here, but could not quite gather what it meant. A barber! Astonishing! Tell me how you discovered him."

She laid her hand lightly on his arm, patting it gently. Hector's father!

"Search out Monsieur Arnaud or Monsieur de Bac, dear Marquis," she said with her most brilliant smile. "They know the whole story and will be glad to tell you all about it. It is a very extraordinary one, I promise you. And say I sent you."

"I will indeed, dear Madame. A thousand thanks."

An audacious idea came to her. And this one she acted on.

"Some of us are going on for supper afterwards to celebrate the occasion," she said. "Would you do us the honour of coming?"

"But I should be delighted," he cried.

"Then do. Join up with Arnaud and de Bac. They will be coming."

And uttering further thanks he departed on the quest of what he immediately recognized, from long experience, to be a story of the theatres well worth hearing.

Hector, observing his departure, turned to her.

"It was most interesting to meet him," he said. "I have heard so much about him, and he is the first man of that type I have ever spoken to. But shall I have to endure this much longer?"

She smiled encouragingly.

"Hold on a little longer. You have done wonderfully

well. I am proud of you. Then we shall all be going somewhere to supper."

The mention of supper was news to him, and threatened further ordeals. But her words of commendation heartened him and he set himself to see this extraordinary night through, feeling already a command over himself which he would not have dreamed, a short half-hour earlier, that he could have possessed. It was as though the more he mixed with this sort of people the easier he found it. Even the famous Marquis had not been difficult after the first moment.

The first fury of assault on the hero of the evening passed, and Hector found himself talking easily with a dark little woman whom he had gathered was a well-known portrait painter. Her manner was so natural and friendly—even when she approached what might have been a difficult subject—that he found no difficulty in being perfectly at ease with her.

"By the way," she said, "is it true what people are telling me—that when you are not writing plays you are in a barber's shop?"

The question, from her, did not hurt him. He smiled down at her.

"It is true. I left my work as usual at seven o'clock this evening."

She laughed merrily.

"But how romantic! To be in your shop this evening, and now to be the lion of the Etoile to-night. It is the most wonderful thing that has happened in Paris for a long time." How Paris will love the story when it hears it."

"You think Paris will hear it?"

"Will Paris hear it! Why, it will make an immense sensation. I assure you, you have no idea of how famous you will be. The brightest comedy of the season written by . . . Ah, think of it."

Hector laughed merrily. Put in this open, engaging way the situation was robbed of its terrors. She was the only one who had been frank enough so to speak to him, although at that very moment the fact that he was a barber was probably being referred to, pleasantly, humorously or caustically, in a dozen of the groups standing round him. Everybody knew it, or would know it. He must never lose sight of this. His best weapon against malice or ridicule would be a calm acceptance of the situation as it was. The wits would be disarmed if he met them half-way. He felt suddenly relieved, and for the first time began really to savour something of his triumph.

Lina came up to him with Dr. Lemoine. She had changed from her simple frock of the play, and looked glorious in an evening gown, with a rich fur thrown over her shoulders.

"Follow me as quietly as possible," she murmured with the air of a conspirator enjoying the fun. "Those who are coming to supper know all about it, and those who are not will gradually realize we are gone. It is the only way to break up this happy party."

They reached the street without incident, and entered Lina's automobile. It stopped after a run of a few minutes, and Hector realized, with a catch in his heart, that they were entering the doorway of the Café de Paris, the scene of his first tragic moments in the capital.

The same ante-room—and now an inkling of Lina's intention came to him. A dozen or more people were already gathered there, a number of whom had been present on the other occasion. He recognized at once Lepelletier, the fat man whose tipsy interjections had precipitated the crisis. Lepelletier avoided looking at him, but Hector's mind was made up on the instant. He went up boldly, with a twinkle in his eye.

"We meet again," he said. "And I hope that this time you won't expect your barber to be any more amusing than anybody else—yourself for instance."

Lepelletier looked at him helplessly.

"My friend, what can I say?" He spread out his arms with a gesture of despair. "There has never been anything like it. No, truly, I do not know what to say. What can one say? I apologize, *mon ami*. Your comedy to-night was superb and your revenge is magnificent. Can one say more?"

"No more," said Hector. "It is quite enough."

The ante-room filled up rapidly, and soon they went in to supper. It was the same room, the same shaded lights and richness of decoration. He found himself sitting next to Lina, as he had done before. . . . A dreaminess stole over him. Was it possible that all these things had happened to him since he sat there last; that from exaltation he had passed through bitter despair, and had now risen again to the amazing triumph of an hour ago? He felt that at any moment he might wake up and hear Lepelletier saying again brutally: "When is our barber going to be amusing?"

He became aware that Lina was leaning towards him and speaking.

". . . I invited all those who were here before, asking them to meet the unknown author of the new comedy. Most of them, as you see, are here. I think we have given some of them food for thought. Look how glum poor Arnaud is looking. Poor man! He did not wish to come when he realized the truth to-night. He came to me with reproaches. I told him that no true man of the world would dream of not giving you your revenge. That was quite enough. His vanity did the rest, immediately. He has a bourgeois soul, poor little man, but he would rather die than not be considered the last word in masculine *chic*."

She laughed merrily, in no way disturbed by Arnaud's apparent gloom.

"You see also," she went on, "that I asked the Marquis de Malvoisin-Montigny to come. He was delighted, and I felt that the occasion would be completed by him." Her eyes rested on Hector. "He is such a famous Parisian figure. Then there is Dr. Lemoine. He represents your old life. He is a dear, Dr. Lemoine. And finally Senhor de Roza, my Brazilian millionaire. I could not have done it all without him. He is so very rich, and when people know you are backed up by a man like that you can do anything. You approve?"

She laughed as she said it. She was in very gay spirits.

Approve! This really was the Arabian Nights come true. For him and his poor affairs to be subjected to such influences! For this queen of women, this fabulously rich millionaire, this famous old roué, and his excellent friend the Doctor all to be invoked and put into action to further his little circumstances! It was fantastic.

"Approve!" he murmured fervently. "You have been too wonderful. I had no idea you were going to do all this. It is noble of you. I shall never be able to thank you enough for what you have done for me. But it was very daring—this gathering, here of all places."

"Perhaps. But it has been successful. You approve also of my—shall we call it revenge?"

"With such an avenging angel how could I do otherwise?" he replied. Encouraged by her smile he went on: "But the most precious thing to me is that you and I are comrades in this."

"Yes, I feel that we are comrades—good comrades," she said.

Her eyes rested smilingly on him for an instant—an intoxicating instant. His heart leaped. He looked round

the long table feeling that he was master of his fate. Away with doubts and fears. Life was wonderful, and this was the night of nights.

II

Arnaud felt very much the skeleton at the feast. He raged inwardly that Lina should have treated him so spitefully. And all for whom? For this fool of a barber! It was one thing to feel for the poor devil as the victim of a practical joke that went wrong—a man whose body might be found in the Seine some day. But from that to this—it was sheer sentimental madness. A few handsome bank-notes ought to have been sufficient to settle the business. And here he was exalted to the skies, his play acclaimed, sitting next to Lina and evidently on very good terms indeed with her.

Peste—but how beautiful she looked! His vanity would not allow him to admit that he had suddenly become jealous of Hector. That would be too absurd. And yet she never spoke and laughed with him as she was doing now with her precious barber. Occasionally women became quite incomprehensible. And she was the most incomprehensible of all. An enigma.

An idea with which he had occasionally graciously toyed on previous occasions came more definitely into his mind. Perhaps he would propose marriage. Surely she would not refuse that! After that violently romantic *farceur* of a husband of hers, who had so considerably broken his own neck, she would surely realize the advantages of being conventionally allied with one so normal, so eminently desirable from a worldly point of view, as himself. Perhaps that was where he had been wrong all along, and it would be advisable now to hurry up.

He realized now, also, that he had a real rival in the

Brazilian. He had been rejecting such an idea for some time past, but the part Senhor de Roza had played in the production of the barber's play compelled him now to admit it. She had needed help, and had gone to him for it. And the man was infernally rich.

Arnaud's eyes dwelt on him, swarthy and thick set, his eyes almost the colour of his native coffee. The contemplation cheered him a little. If it came to a choice between the two she surely could not hesitate.

Anyhow sooner or later this absurd pose of Lina's of being all-sufficient to herself, without any man in her life, must be broken down, even if marriage had to be the manner of doing it. Such chastity in her *milieu* was merely quixotic, and could not be tolerated indefinitely.

Arnaud's temper was not improved by the exchange of brief speeches between de Bac and Hector. De Bac's effort was a masterly display of skating over thin ice. Hector's reply was hardly less admirable in its dexterity. The fellow could speak, confound him, and he had an air.

This dreadful supper over, Arnaud tried to capture Lina for a few minutes alone. The moment had arrived, he realized, to try to smooth matters. But Lina was surrounded, with the Brazilian hovering near.

When the moment came to hand her into her car the Brazilian was again there, with the barber and his provincial doctor friend also in attendance. Arnaud was merely one of a crowd.

He found himself standing with de Roza, and the others gone. The two rivals walked up the quiet street, their automobiles crawling slowly and majestically behind them, awaiting their pleasure. Arnaud was nursing the silence of an angry man.

"You have not yet got over your chagrin, then?" said the Brazilian, in his quiet deep voice.

"By no means," answered Arnaud grimly.

"But this poor devil has had so much bad luck that you surely do not grudge him his little triumph."

"The whole thing angers me—that is all," burst out Arnaud. "When I think of the duplicity, the scheming she has had to employ—why, she has made an ass of me. Everybody knows it. I ask you, is it pleasant to be made a fool in Paris and for the sake of a barber? And then she is so amiable with the fellow. One would say she was fond of him." • •

The Brazilian laughed, quite heartily.

"But you are absurd to say that. What Lina has done for our barber friend is a tribute to her good heart—no more. She had been touched by the man's distress, and was determined to lift him up again. All that she had done was a reaction against—how shall I say it?—against the indelicacy of the little *farce* you others played on him. Frankly I admire her deeply for it. It is rare to find in one of Fortune's favourites such concern for another who can be of no possible use to her. That is all there is in it. Would you have had her neglect him to-night? It was his night."

"It is easy for you to talk, but you have not seen a play of your own displaced by this absurd individual," replied Arnaud angrily.

"I do not write plays, *mon ami*," said the Brazilian dryly. "I am content to let others amuse me."

They separated, the Brazilian turning into his club for a little late play, and Arnaud driving home to his luxurious apartment on the Champs Élysées feeling in no way appeased by the Brazilian's point of view. Something would have to be done about this interloper. If he had any more comedies up his sleeve Arnaud might find himself crowded indefinitely out of the theatre over which he exercised—or ought to exercise—a partial control. The situation was absurd—quite apart from his sentimental and passionate interest in Lina.

CHAPTER XVI

I

HECTOR had already decided, from pride as much as anything else, that he would not allow the fact that he was about to become an acknowledged playwright interfere, too soon, with his normal calling as a barber. For the time being, at any rate, he intended to continue as an employee of M. Lepetit.

He might have taken the plunge, left hairdressing behind him for good, and embarked without any great risk on the adventure of literature in Paris. His needs were simple, and there was the little shop in far-away St. Médard to provide for them.

Acting on the advice of the Doctor he had not sold his business outright, but had retained an interest in it, with his old assistant Paillasse as partner.

"Let hairdressing, which has for so long been your master, now be your servant," the Doctor had said "Use it to subsidize your activities in Paris. People will always need to have their hair cut and their beards trimmed. But literature is always an adventure. Remain a poet, and let Paillasse supply your needs."

Despite this he remained in the employ of M. Lepetit. Perhaps a little superstition was also mixed up in his decision. He had once received such a rude buffet from Fate that he had no desire to risk another by showing any over-confidence in the future.

He had not even told Marcelle of the wonderful thing that had happened to him and of the possible coming change in his fortunes. After his return to Paris they had resumed their relations on much the same basis as before, but had not met so frequently. He had so much to think about that he often preferred to be alone. It was a matter that needed considerable tact.

"You are changed," Marcelle had said more than once. "I said you would be, after that mysterious journey. You are different."

It was difficult. He liked being with her, partly for her companionship, partly because he knew that it meant so much to her. But that was precisely the greatest difficulty of all. He realized that she was deeply in love with him. He hated the idea of hurting her. But what could a man do with a Marcelle, with his head full of the play—and of a Lina!

Gently he tried to make the entanglement less intense, while still remaining on terms of cordial comradeship. But in pursuing this course it gradually became apparent to him that he had set himself the most delicate and subtle task of diplomacy that a man can undertake. Marcelle had become a problem.

He felt it to be unfair to her, also, that she should still be utterly in the dark about his affairs—she who had insisted originally that he must be a poet, and not a barber. But he had been bound to utter secrecy by Lina, and there was no way out of it. In any case he preferred that Marcelle should learn the surprising news of her mysterious friend after the production of the play and not before.

He went on working as usual at M. Lepetit's even during those wonderful weeks when his comedy was in rehearsal. He would have given anything to attend them, but that too was impossible. On the night of the production he left the shop at the ordinary time. The only change in his habits was that he went for the night to the

hotel where Dr. Lemoine was staying, changed into the new dress suit he had bought, and dined with the Doctor, during which time his friend betrayed more excitement than he did.

Afterwards they drove to the Etoile, and before the house had begun to fill up were ushered quietly into the box where they remained during the whole of the performance.

Following on the supper in his honour Hector found himself entering the hotel with Dr. Lemoine at something after two in the morning. The Doctor in a frame of mind which was not far short of ecstatic, had insisted on having champagne sent to his room even at that late hour—although he had already had quite as much as was good for him—and for an hour or more they had sat discussing the amazing evening they had passed through together.

"Marvellous, marvellous," the Doctor repeated. "To think that you and I, sons of St. Médard, should be the centre of these great affairs in Paris . . . That wonderful woman. People talk about the vanity, the egotism of those on the stage. It may be true. But she is an angel from heaven. She is unique . . . And your speech. An admirable blend of dignity and humour. But what a drama that you should have been able to utter it there on the spot where you were crucified! Hector Duval, of St. Médard, leading the wits of Paris by the nose. That old rip of a Marquis was delighted. He said you had given him a greater thrill than anything he had known for twenty years. . . : *Bon Dieu*, what a night! Your glass, *mon vieux*. You are already famous, and you will soon be rich."

It had ended in Hector putting the Doctor to bed and thankfully retiring to his own. He fell asleep instantly, thanks to the wine he had drunk. But habit awoke him next morning shortly after seven. The strange bedroom puzzled him at first. Then the events of the night came

to him with a rush and he lay back, savouring his wonderful triumph in spite of the throbbing of his head.

But all the same he decided to go to business in the usual way. The situation appealed to his sense of humour. The successful author of the *Etoile* was about to start out for his barber's shop! But why not? M. Lepetit would be expecting him. He had no idea that he was harbouring a poet and playwright, and would tear his hair if Hector were absent during the busy hours. It was his duty to go. He rang for coffee and, yielding as much to the force of habit as anything else, began to dress.

A little later he entered the Doctor's room. That worthy was still sleeping soundly. He looked round him in a dazed way after Hector had awakened him, and was obviously at some pains to collect his thoughts. Then he sat up and held his head.

"What a night, eh, what a night! And what a head I have got. Think of it. I spend all my life advising other people to live wisely and well, and here I am with a head like an aching turnip. But it was worth it. I have been dreaming of that adorable Lina. What a woman!"

Hector announced that he was about to proceed to business, and asked when and where they could meet later in the day.

The Doctor stared at him.

"What, you the hero of last night, are about to proceed to your barber's shop! But don't be absurd."

They argued it out at some length, but Hector was resolute.

"At least let us see what the newspapers say before you go," said the Doctor finally.

"There will be nothing in them. The *critiques* of new plays are not given until the day but one after."

"True, I had forgotten. But all the same, let us send for them. There may be something."

The Doctor rang, and ordered all the morning papers that could be obtained immediately—but immediately! They arrived in a few minutes. The Doctor seized the first one, spread it out, and gasped as his eyes fell on the first page. •

“But look—just look!”

Across four columns of type was spread a great headline “L’Affaire Hector Duval.” A rapid glance was sufficient to show them that the whole story of Hector and his play was told, with a wealth of detail and quite a good deal of invention. Everything from the banquet onwards.

“*Bon Dieu!*” cried the Doctor, “the world has heard of you at last. Let us see what is in the others.”

They divided the newspapers and raced through them feverishly. And every moment the Doctor gave utterance to an explosive exclamation. He was wearing, as he had always done, a white cotton nightgown, and the fringe of hair round his bald head was sticking out defiantly. But he was unaware that there was anything striking in his appearance. He had forgotten his headache, and was shaking with excitement.

“*Boum*, but listen to this!” he cried. “‘In all the history of the Parisian stage there has never been a more sensational literary debut.’ And again listen to this. ‘Brilliant as is the comedy of our author it is excelled in dramatic interest by the true story of how this play came to be acclaimed at one of our premier theatres.’ And this: ‘At one bound he has leapt from the obscurity of the barber’s shop to the giddy height of author of a comedy which promises to bring all Paris to his feet. And this amazing transformation is the work of a woman—a woman whose tender heart revolted at cruelty wantonly inflicted, and who determined to right a wrong.’”

And exclaiming and quoting with the rapidity of a machine-gun the Doctor raced through one newspaper

after another, finding at every moment new sources of amazement.

As for Hector he was both exultant and appalled as he read through the various accounts. Here was fame indeed. He was the man of the moment. But his story was now public to the whole world, and he shrank from the concentrated limelight that shone on him. And yet, he told himself, it was perhaps better this way. Here should be an end, finally, to any fears on the subject. St. Médard would know it all in a few hours. Everybody would know it. That was all over and done with. There could be no more shocks now, no more surprises. Even if there were his capacity for feeling them had become exhausted.

He turned to the Doctor.

"Well, what do you think of it all?" he asked calmly.

"The more one sees of you the more incredible you become, my young friend. If advertisement goes for anything you are a colossus and your fortune is made. There can be no doubt that after this Paris will take you to her bosom. And tell me, then, you do not still propose to go off to your absurd barber's shop and once more put on your ridiculous white jacket—your badge of servitude?"

"Yes, I still intend to go. Monsieur Lepetit will expect me. I shall be as well there as anywhere. And remember that my comedy may not be a success."

Dr. Lemoine snorted.

"Not a success! With all this palpitating and romantic booming! Never was a comedy surer of success."

"Still, I intend to go. It will help me to keep things in perspective."

"Then you are mad, my young friend. I had long suspected that you were a genius. Now I'm sure of it. Ring that bell for me. I'll have some coffee and then put some cold water on this sacred, aching head of mine."

Of all the people who read the story of Hector and his play in the newspapers that morning none was so dumb-founded as Marcelle.

She was thinking that morning, as usual, of this strange lover of hers who refused to become a lover; thinking of him as she prepared her breakfast of coffee and rolls, as she sat in the omnibus that rolled down the hill of Montmartre, and as she walked along the Rue de la Paix to the famous dressmaking establishment of Roget's. And then he disappeared from her mind as she went about her preparations, in the carpeted *salon*, for the day's work.

She had been there but a few minutes when Georgette, one of her especial comrades, came up to her, all excitement, with a newspaper in her hand. Lina Bernay was an occasional client of the establishment, but that apart, anything concerning her was always a matter of keen interest to the girls who worked there.

"Have you read this extraordinary story of how Lina Bernay—but read it, all that," said Georgette, handing over the newspaper.

It was one of those which described the story of Hector and his play from the beginning, with every detail that it had been possible to acquire. Marcelle noticed with astonishment his name in the headlines, and needed no further urging to read. With rapidly growing amazement she learned at last the truth about her mysterious friend.

Her face showed something of the emotions aroused within her.

"Isn't it thrilling!" broke in Georgette. "Just the very sort of thing she would do." Her interest in the affair was principally on account of Lina. "There are

not many actresses like her, I know. She has a good heart."

Marcelle agreed, vacantly. She wanted to tell her friend all that this meant to her, but managed to suppress the impulse. She was feeling that she had just cause for very keen resentment against Hector, but had to listen for some time to Georgette's excited comments before she could get rid of her, and be alone to think.

This was the story of her "comrade" with whom she had passed so many hours, and she had to learn it all from a newspaper! Here was the explanation of his coldness, of his refusal to tell her anything about himself. He knew that he was going to be famous, and he had been unwilling for her to share in it!

Her thoughts turned to Lina, and she found that she was fiercely jealous. To her it seemed at once that Lina must have a tender interest in him, just as she had herself. Not a word had he breathed to suggest that he knew Lina; not even on that occasion in the Montmartre night café when they had seen her and she had talked so much about her. She remembered now his agitation on that occasion; how she had taken him to her little flat and made tea, and tried to console him for a trouble she did not understand.

In Marcelle's mind the tale of duplicity was complete. He had been content to be friendly with her in his dejection, but had disdained giving her a share in his happiness and success. If only, she told herself, he had given her the slightest sign of what the future might hold for him, she could have overlooked this revelation. But she, his companion night after night, had kept an utter stranger to it until all Paris knew.

It was with a heavy weight of misery on her heart that she went about her work.

Immediately following on her reading of the amazing news she had to attend to an ancient and testy Countess

from the Faubourg St. Germain and her plain daughter. They were very trying, and as she moved over the thickly carpeted room, displaying model after model on the undulating mannequins and uttering the customary polite and deferential phrases, she had to keep a tight rein over her emotions, feeling that anything might precipitate a scene which would mean her saying an immediate adieu to Roget's.

"Madame la Comtesse indeed!" hissed Marcelle into the ear of one of the pretty mannequins, at a moment when there was no danger of the two clients hearing it. "If I could only tell the old cat what I think about her."

"But what is the matter?" asked the mannequin in surprise. It was very unusual to find Marcelle in this sort of mood.

"Nothing—except I feel it is about time we had another revolution," murmured Marcelle savagely.

And a second later she was back at the side of her clients murmuring deferentially: "If Madame la Comtesse will be good enough to wait a moment I think we shall find something more suitable."

She gave a sigh of relief when they had finally gone. She preferred to be alone. There was so much to think of. Why had he not told her anything? And why . . . ?

Two new clients came in, and Marcelle was startled to see that they were Arnaud and his *petite amie*, Fifi D'Artois of the *Bouffes Parisiens*, a pretty, vivacious and very artificially blonde little person, of no particular talents as an actress but with a genius for getting on in the world. Marcelle knew every detail of her career from its humblest beginnings.

Arnaud, too, she knew. His name had figured in the account she had just read. She felt it to be very strange that he should appear at this moment.

The newspaper she had been reading lay on a chair in the corner of the room. Arnaud, a little bored with the proceedings with which he was thoroughly familiar, from many similar visits to Roget's and elsewhere, wandered round the room and picked up the newspaper. He had already read a half-dozen that morning, but this particular one he had not seen, and he ran quickly through the long and flowery account printed in it. Then he threw it down again with an exclamation of annoyance.

Marcelle heard him, and their eyes met.

"You have been reading of the great sensation," he said to her with a laugh. Mlle. Fifi was busy for the moment and there was nothing to prevent them talking.

"Yes. I was amazed. It is extraordinary."

"I am not flattered," went on Arnaud, "that a barber should be the author of a comedy at the Etoile. It is hardly in the tradition."

She hesitated a moment.

"All the same," she said with a touch of bitterness, "he is a remarkable man."

Arnaud looked at her keenly.

"*Comment!* You know him then?"

"Do I know him! I should say so! We were very close friends. I met him just after he first came to Paris and we were together nearly every night."

To Arnaud, looking at the trim figure of Marcelle in her becoming black dress, this meant only one thing. He was immediately very interested.

"Ah! Then you must have known long ago who was the author of the anonymous comedy."

"On the contrary," she said intensely, "that is what hurts me. I only learned all that," she swept her hand towards the newspaper, "less than an hour ago, when

a friend here pointed it out to me. Oh, no! I feel it deeply. He never told me anything. Not the least little thing. He was always mysterious. And it is left to me to learn all about his good fortune from a newspaper. It is not nice, that."

The mask of the polite, deferential shop girl was off, and Arnaud could see that she was really disturbed.

"I can't imagine anybody not being nice with you," he said with a smile. "But then, what can one expect from a barber?"

She wrinkled her brows at this.

"Ah, no, that has nothing to do with it. He may be that, but he is not the kind of man you meet every day. Apparently he has written a brilliant comedy. I thought he was a poet when I first saw him, but he denied it."

She sighed and looked very miserable.

"In any case," insisted Arnaud, "he seems to have treated you very badly. For my part it does not surprise me in the least."

"I bear him no malice, Monsieur. But I feel very hurt that he should have kept me entirely out of his confidence. During the past few weeks I have hardly seen him. Pardon, I must attend to Madame." And she hurried back to her post.

Arnaud rubbed his chin reflectively as he watched the further process of selecting gowns. There was surely something in this situation to provide him with a useful weapon against Hector. He felt it a most fortunate chance that he had come into Roget's that morning and met Marcelle. Nobody else at present knew this little ramification of the great "affaire Hector Duval." It added a touch that was missing even in that richly coloured episode. And it was very distinctly against the hero of the story. How could he best exploit it? At the very least he ought to be able to damage the upstart very considerably in the eyes of Lina.

There came into his mind the accounts of Hector's first experience in Paris which he had paid to have suppressed in several of the newspapers. What more easy than to pay now to have an account of quite another kind inserted? A skilful and not too scrupulous writer describing the story of a charming girl abandoned by her lover at the moment of his startling success, could make much of such an opportunity. He had only to pay enough and, in certain quarters that he knew of, he could have published precisely what he wanted.

Arnaud was a little preoccupied as he went out with Mlle. Fifi.

"What is the matter, *cher ami*," she said, putting her hand on his arm. She was well pleased, having chosen three frocks which left nothing to be desired even to her luxurious mind.

"Nothing, my dear," he replied, still absently.

"But yes," she insisted caressingly. "I know there is something. Is it that absurd affair that is still worrying you?"

He smiled at her. Fifi was very charming and melting when she chose to display all her arts.

"Well, then, yes. I was still thinking of that. Come. I want to go and see somebody on the *Moniteur*. Then we will go and have lunch wherever you please."

And Fifi tripped lightly into Arnaud's stately limousine, at which his chauffeur was standing with the door held open.

Hector arrived a little late at M. Lepetit's *salon*. On the way there it had occurred to him for the first time that his secret was probably quite well-known to his employer and other assistants by now. There was not one of them

who did not read his morning paper. Obviously they must know.

It was therefore with some trepidation that he entered. Here was another ordeal. It seemed to be his lot to be constantly encountering ordeals.

He was left in no doubt the moment he entered. M. Lepetit espied him immediately, from the little railed-in enclosure in which he sat and observed for the greater part of his time. The *patron* did not attempt to conceal his excitement. He descended at once to the floor and came forward with both hands outstretched.

"You here! Yet I felt you would come to see us just the same."

"And why not?" said Hector a little weakly, accepting the warm double handshake extended to him.

"You old joker!" cried M. Lepetit in jovial indignation. "I always knew there was something wrong with you. And so you are a poet, a dramatist—heaven knows what. And a first-class barber into the bargain. *Ciel*, what a combination! And what a night it must have been for you! What a triumph! Name of a dog, but what an extraordinary affair! And so you have come to bid us adieu. The famous dramatist goes to his country château to prepare another triumph. His automobile awaits him without to . . ."

"But on the contrary, I have come to work," protested Hector.

M. Lepetit threw his head back and laughed heartily.

"Ah, I think I see you. Thinking out your plots while you cut my clients' hair. No, no. You were an artist here. I have often observed you. But your success in another sphere of art will spoil your touch. And think of how people would crowd to see you. We have as much as we can do already. It would be a wonderful advertisement for the establishment. But we cannot have

it turned into a literary *salon*. We may be artists here, but we are serious all the same."

And M. Lepetit, half serious, half joking, laughed again at his own view of the matter.

"All the same I have come to work this morning, and I am going to begin," said Hector.

"Ah, we'll see, we'll see," returned M. Lepetit. "It won't last long. But all the others want to talk to you. They have been discussing the wonderful news, and the sooner they hear all about it from you, the sooner we shall settle down tranquilly to business." And waving his arm to all the other assistants, M. Lepetit retired again to his enclosure.

The others crowded round Hector immediately. There was no business being done as yet, and Hector was at once subjected to a good deal of chaff, some congratulation, and one or two remarks which were envious, if they were not ill-natured. He bore it all as evenly as possible, conscious of his own good fortune, and disposed to be very tolerant on that account.

Fortunately the entry of a client arrested matters in full cry. There was a loud warning cough from M. Lepetit and the group melted away. Free once more, and considerably relieved that it was all over, Hector prepared himself soberly for the morning's work.

It went on in the normal fashion as the *salon* filled up, and he had hardly time to reflect on the incongruity between his experiences of the night before and his present occupation. But towards the middle of the morning he was brought back suddenly to the realization that things had changed.

Shortly after eleven o'clock a young and alert-looking individual presented himself at the little enclosure where M. Lepetit sat enthroned and asked him rather abruptly whether there had ever worked for him an assistant by name Hector Duval.

"Has he ever worked for me!" replied M. Lepetit vivaciously, taken off his guard. "I should say so. He still works for me. There he is!" And with an impressive sweep of his hand the proprietor indicated his famous assistant.

It was the stranger's turn to be surprised.

"What! Do you mean to say that he still works as a barber?"

"But there he is," insisted M. Lepetit, regretting even as he said the words that he had given the information so freely.

"Many thanks," said the young man hurriedly, and went and sat down on a seat behind Hector. M. Lepetit kept a close eye on him.

"One of these newspaper men," he growled and felt angry with himself at being so easily pumped, even though he was distinctly pleased at the certainty of the *salon* Lepetit figuring in the daily press.

In a little while Hector was free. He signalled politely to the young man behind him, who came forward and demanded a haircut. The operation went on under the very interested eyes of M. Lepetit. Hector having finished his task, the young man suddenly bounded to his feet and addressed him.

"I thank you very much, Monsieur Hector Duval. It is not often that one has the privilege of being so ministered to by a famous dramatist."

Very much taken aback Hector stared at him.

"Who are you?" he demanded.

"I am a representative of *Le Soleil*, and I wish to know your life history, also all that happened to you after you first disappeared in Paris, and why it is that in spite of your great success last night you continue to work here, and, in short, anything else that may be of interest."

All this was said in one breath. Hector felt stunned.

He also felt a little ridiculous. Why, after all, had he come here again?

"I regret I have nothing to say," he replied lamely.

"But that is absurd," insisted the young man energetically. "It is your duty to tell everything. The public of Paris demands it."

He had raised his voice and everybody in the long room, customers and assistants, were turning to see what it was about.

To Hector, accustomed for years to the most complete decorum while pursuing his daily task, whether in St. Médard or Paris, this unexpected irruption was most distressing. He knew that the eye of M. Lepetit was upon him, anxious and disturbed. At that moment Hector felt that he was entirely the barber and in no way the dramatist. He also felt that he would like to strangle this awkward intruder.

"You must see," he said harshly, "that this is not the place to talk over such things. I am busy and others are waiting. I must ask you to leave me now."

"Ah, that, never!" cried the young man in outraged tones. "I have been looking for you since eight this morning. The Press is paramount. If you think . . ."

At that moment another eager young man, with strikingly long and untamed hair, came into the *salon*. His quick eye fell on the first, and he immediately came up to him, speaking urgently and impetuously.

"Hello, Badoud, any luck? I have been all up one side of the Boulevards and all down the other. I have seen more hairdressers in one morning than I have seen in all my life before . . ."

He suddenly stopped at the sight of Badoud's face, which now wore anything but a pleased expression, and then stared hard at Hector.

"Hello, but I believe you've found him!"

"No thanks to you," growled Badoud.

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"But it is only your luck," said the newcomer vehemently, scenting a lack of cordiality. "Did we not arrange . . ."

"Yes, but all the same . . ."

Their voices were raised high. Every assistant had ceased work. The customers were craning their necks towards the centre of disturbance. Out of the corner of his eye Hector saw M. Lepetit descending from his throne. He felt unnerved. And turning away from the sight of M. Lepetit's evident perturbation he saw Dr. Lemoine coming from the door towards him.

"Heavens, everything comes together," sighed Hector, now quite distracted.

The dispute between the two sleuth-hounds of the Press had grown louder and distinctly acrimonious.

"I tell you he is mine," cried Badoud. "I found him. I have had my hair cut by him. He has promised me the complete and exclusive . . ."

"The devil! I like that. What do you take me for?" cried the long-haired one. "Why, only an hour ago . . .?"

M. Lepetit had now reached the group.

"Gentlemen, I pray you . . ." he began urgently and earnestly, and flung himself boldly into the discussion.

Dr. Lemoine had halted and stared for a moment. Then he advanced to Hector, who had edged away from the quarrelling rivals.

"What is it—what is the matter?" he demanded.

"It is terrible," exclaimed Hector in anguish. "They are two newspaper reporters, and they are competing for my body. Look at Monsieur Lepetit. He is beside himself."

"To the devil with Monsieur Lepetit," rapped out the Doctor, really angry. "I told you it was absurd your coming here this morning. I had come to take you away for something to eat, somewhere in the Bois. We both

need calm after last night. Quick. Get your hat and coat. Never mind this thing." He plucked impatiently at Hector's white jacket. "Leave it on, snatch up your clothes, and bolt while they are quarrelling. Quick, quick! I have a taxi waiting at the door."

Hector seized the chance of deliverance. Acting as naturally as possible so as not to cause suspicion, he stole away to the little room at the end of the *salon*, unhooked his hat and coat from where they were hanging, and then holding them behind him advanced again up the long room. M. Lepetit and the two rivals were now thoroughly *en train*. M. Lepetit had completely forgotten the quiet and decorum due to his establishment and in a loud voice was giving the intruders—as far as their interruptions and mutual recriminations would allow him—a severe homily on the duty of not causing a disturbance on other people's premises.

Hector halted for a moment by the group, to give them confidence. Dr. Lemoine had by this time walked to the door, and suddenly held it wide open. Then Hector bolted—frankly and openly bolted—down the long room, past the amazed assistants and the row of clients, leaving M. Lepetit's establishment and the profession of barber behind him for ever. Together they tumbled into the taxi.

"To the Bois. Hurry!" cried Dr. Lemoine to the driver.

As the taxi gave a preliminary jolt, and then rolled away, the two rivals appeared, wild-eyed and angry, in the doorway, and with frantic cries dashed after it.

But the taxi had now settled into its stride, and their efforts were in vain. They both stopped and remained in the middle of the street, gazing despairingly at their escaping prey. Dr. Lemoine stood up and joyously waved his hand at them.

"The penalty of fame, my dear Hector," he said as

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he sank down again. "I felt something of the kind would happen. But I arrived in time to rescue you. Let this be a lesson to you, and henceforth never enter a barber's shop except to have your hair cut. . . . Name of a dog, but what a funny world it is." And the Doctor leaned back and roared with laughter.

"You are right," replied Hector. "I owe you yet another debt of gratitude. This must be the end of Hector Duval, barber." And taking off his white jacket he rolled it up into a ball, and as the taxi raced across the Place de la Concorde, quietly dropped it overboard.

CHAPTER XVII

It was the end of the third night of the production of "Juliette Shows the Way." The critics, with practically no exceptions, had already unreservedly blessed the play and now a full house had departed after giving very marked proof of its appreciation.

The simple nature of the piece, with its pleasant humour, had made a universal appeal. It had come as quite a discovery that real comedy might lie in the lives of small people. It was not absolutely necessary, then, to portray life as it was passed among the rich and fashionable. Here were amusing people who had never bought anything in the Rue de la Paix, who never mentioned Monte Carlo, and whose wives were not necessarily found in other men's flats. It was really novel.

Lina sat in her dressing-room feeling relaxed but happy and content after the ovation just given the company. She felt completely confident now that the play had been started on a long and successful run. The past few weeks, particularly the past few days, had been a very anxious time for her. She had been constrained to behave in a high-handed fashion to carry her point. Even her position would have been shaken had the play been in any way a failure. But its success was triumphant. She had been justified in every way, and was now feeling the mingled relief and reaction of people who take risks and succeed in their enterprise.

* Marie, her maid, who acted as her dresser, had just

put the finishing touches to her, preparatory to leaving, but Lina waited on, knowing that she would have callers. And in a few moments, M. Descouvres, the Director of the theatre, and Arnaud were announced.

M. Descouvres, up to now, had been distinctly reserved in expressing his own praise. He had refused to be too much moved by the enthusiasm of the first night, saying petulantly that what such an invited audience might say was no guide to what Paris itself might say. He had remained coy even after the hilarious and jovial atmosphere of the first public night. But a renewal of the enthusiasm had conquered him. He had decided to give in, and tell Lina that her judgment had been thoroughly vindicated.

"She is a hot-head and has behaved like an autocrat," he said to Arnaud as they went along to the dressing-room, "but there's no doubt about it, she has won. *Place aux dames!* She has dared to find something new. I know what you feel about it, my friend. But we must both admit that we are beaten."

Lina welcomed them warmly in her room, and listened with pleasure to M. Descouvres' full acknowledgment of her triumph. To get her way she had been compelled to ride almost rough-shod even over the susceptibilities of the Director of the Etoile. It was generous of him to be so very congratulatory.

"And Hector—what a type, eh?" continued M. Descouvres, the floodgates of appreciation now wide open. "I like him—yes, but I like him. He is modest. He is a good fellow. And who would have dreamed of finding such talent in such a quarter?"

"It pleases me very much to hear you say that," said Lina simply. "He deserves his success."

"By the way," said Arnaud, who had hardly spoken up to now, "have either of you seen the *Moniteur* to-night?" He pulled a newspaper from his overcoat

pocket as he spoke. "There is something rather interesting—rather curious—about him." He handed the paper to M. Descouvres who—avid of anything in the Press concerning his theatre—took it and began to read immediately.

"Ha, ha," he exclaimed after a few moments, "the young lady is angry, very angry."

He read it through, with exclamations. At the finish he shrugged his shoulders eloquently and frowned.

"Not a very nice story. A nasty story. It's unfortunate, very unfortunate, coming just at this moment."

"What is it?" said Lina quickly. "Let me see."

"Perhaps you had better not," interjected Arnaud quickly, making as if to take the paper.

"Pardon," she said with a frown. "If everybody else reads it I suppose I may."

With a show of unwillingness Arnaud handed it to her and she began to read. Her brows wrinkled as her gaze travelled slowly down the column. There was complete silence in the room as she read on. Arnaud looked across at M. Descouvres and raised his eyebrows. M. Descouvres shrugged his shoulders again.

There was a knock on the door, and in response to Lina's call Hector entered, followed by Dr. Lemoine. Hector, living nobly up to his new life, was in the full glory of evening dress. He walked up to Lina, took her hand and bowed over it, and turned to greet the other two. It occurred to him that her hand seemed rather limp. No doubt she was tired.

"I have brought Dr. Lemoine to see you," Hector said to her, "because he is leaving Paris in the morning, and would not dream of going without saying *au revoir* to you."

She smiled at the Doctor, who became voluble on the spot.

"It has been a wonderful visit—wonderful. I have seen my young protégé exalted to the skies. I have seen the Press of Paris concentrate their attention on him alone, I have rescued him finally from his barber's shop—and I have seen you act. To-night, again, was just as charming, just as delicious. I go back a happy man to my hole in the country."

She smiled up at him again, but said nothing. There was silence for a few moments. The Doctor looked round him with sudden intensity.

"But what is the matter? Everybody is very silent. And after such a night as to-night! . . . I feel that you are not gay, all of you. What is the matter, then?"

"You were talking of the wonderful Press campaign in favour of Monsieur Duval," said Arnaud. "Have you read to-night's *Moniteur*?" With a "permit me" he took the paper from Lina's hands and handed it to the Doctor, pointing out the column referring to Hector.

The Doctor, feeling that all was not right, scanned the column quickly, making no comment until he had finished it. Then passing the paper to Hector he delivered himself.

"What rubbish! Here is somebody who wishes to cause trouble. And even if it were true . . . *Enfin*, I don't believe it."

Hector began to read in a state of considerable perturbation. He had not the slightest idea what it was all about. He started to see that it was an interview with Marcelle.

He read on with ever increasing surprise and anger. Could this be Marcelle speaking! He was represented as a base and cynical betrayer of a trusting girl whom he had coldly abandoned the moment he had achieved success. "He loved—and disappeared, and while she sat alone in her modest little room in Montmartre wondering where

her lover had gone, he was listening to the plaudits of Paris at the Etoile Theatre." It was an ugly story, a masterpiece of misrepresentation. And this was what Lina had been reading when he came in!

But his face did not show what he felt as he read the article through. When he had finished he handed the newspaper back to Arnaud with a bow. Arnaud's action in taking the journal from Lina's hands now came back to him.

There was silence for a few moments. It was Arnaud who broke it.

"Well?" he inquired, with a touch of eagerness.

"Well?" returned Hector. "I do not see, Monsieur Arnaud, that it is any concern of yours. I trust I am not here on trial." He looked at Lina.

"Possibly not," returned Arnaud. "And yet all the same it does concern us. We are interested, I think you will agree, in this theatre. Anything that is said about it obviously concerns us."

"In that case," replied Hector, "I have one thing to say. It is that the article is a lie, a malicious fabrication, from beginning to end. What is more, I do not believe my friend Marcelle could ever have spoken like that. It is impossible for her to have said such things. Impossible."

"But it is there," insisted Arnaud, slapping the newspaper with his hand.

"That proves nothing. I had experience some time ago, as you will remember, that things could appear in newspapers which have little relation to fact. It may only mean that somebody is sufficiently anxious to see a certain thing appear. These things, I understand, can always be arranged, in some quarters."

"What do you mean?" flashed Arnaud hotly. "Are you insinuating something?"

"I am. Not necessarily against you. But *somebody*

has felt it worth while to arrange for the publication of this utterly false article." 2

"Do you deny, then, that you were very friendly with this young woman."

"Certainly not. We were great friends. . She had been very kind to me. But friends only."

Arnaud laughed. Hector glared at him, containing himself with an effort.

"Friends only," Hector went on. "Comrades. She was the only friend I had in Paris. But of course I told her nothing about the forthcoming play. That was a secret. I could not tell her or anybody else. For the rest, it is a miserable invention." He turned to Lina. "I am sorry that such a subject should have been raised before you."

Lina wanted to believe him. She almost did believe him. But what she had just read had left a vivid and painful impression on her mind. It was cleverly and convincingly put. There is a subtle power in print. And then, the news of this Marcelle was a complete surprise. She had imagined Hector as being utterly free of feminine entanglements, and did not like this unexpected news of one. Her own vanity was hurt; she who had done so much for the barber before she had made the discovery that he was more than a barber. And she felt that Hector had diminished both her and himself in being so intimate with a Marcelle. It was ridiculous, no doubt, but latterly she had found this strange man invading her thoughts to an extraordinary degree, and in comparing him with anybody else she had found the comparison all to his advantage. It seemed at times that she was conjuring up an almost sentimental regard for him. . . . And this news of a Marcelle somewhere was correspondingly mortifying.

So that, despite all her better instincts, she could not keep a touch of coldness and formality out of her voice.

"It is nothing, Monsieur Duval. One can hardly help seeing things if they are in the newspapers. And no doubt it is all as you say."

Hector stiffened. To his proud and sensitive mind her slightly dubious attitude came as a painful shock. This angel, who had so exalted him, could show herself to be merely human. He exaggerated her change of attitude, and found himself exceedingly distressed.

"I thank you. There is then nothing more to say."

For her part she would willingly have said something more. She was anxious to do so, but the situation was now electric. Flanked by Descouvres and Arnaud, men of the world, cynical, the one no doubt honestly concerned with what in some degree amounted to an attack on his theatre, and the other nursing his spite, what could she now say that might not make a difficult situation even worse—which might even turn to the ridiculous?

She said no more.

"Then good night, Madame."

Hector bowed to her, and with an abrupt inclination to her two companions was retiring towards the door. But Dr. Lemoine had no intention of taking his leave in such a manner.

"Upon my soul, what a monstrous absurdity!" he burst out. His rich, round voice boomed like a cannon in the little room. "What infantile nonsense—if you will permit me to say so, dear Madame. Why all this fuss for nothing? One would say that everybody had suddenly become frozen with horror. Are we in Paris, *sapristi*, or are we confessing our sins to the village *curé*? I don't believe all that rubbish. I am sure it is just as Hector says. You've only to look at him to believe it. I know him. He is not the sort to engage in amorous adventures. I've known him for years—yes, Madame and Messieurs, for years and years. But even if it were true—what of it? Is he not an artist? Is he not a poet? Has

he not written a great play? Would it matter if his path were strewn with conquests? Not a bit of it! Artists have the right to be like that, if they wish to. Many of them would not be artistic unless . . .”

“Pardon, Doctor, but the whole story is damnably untrue,” interjected Hector frigidly.

“Silence!” roared the Doctor, turning on him fiercely. “What does it matter whether it is true or not! I’m a country doctor, an old drug compounder from the provinces, but I know the world, even if I no longer live in Paris. And you, Monsieur”—he took a step towards Arnaud, and glared at him—“I am old enough to be your father, almost your grandfather. You appear to be pained, shocked beyond words, by this little history about nothing. Have you then lived in a monastic cell all your life? Are you innocent of all guile? Have you never heard that there are men and women in this wicked world? Truly I tremble for you, living in this great and sinful Paris. You should be looked after. You need a nurse!”

He turned swiftly to Lina, leaving Arnaud gaping.

“Madame, I must bid you good-bye. My young Telemachus has written a great play. As his Mentor through many years I am proud of him. It has delighted my old heart to see appear in it the most adorable comedienne of our time.” He raised her hand and kissed it. “Adieu, and a thousand thanks for all the pleasure you have given me. I shall return to my patients a new man, surrounded by a nimbus of glory because of the part I have been playing in great and romantic events. . . . Messieurs . . .” He bowed low to the other two, diminishing them by his perfect air, and then taking Hector by the arm swept him irresistibly out of the room.

He did not speak again until they were rolling away from the theatre in a taxi.

“My young friend, there was another situation I had to take in hand. I turned the tables, eh? I saw it was

a case for heavy artillery. I was not an artilleryman in 'seventy for nothing. I put all my heavy guns on them. They were routed, and I leave the situation in your hands . . . But as for that little fop, watch him! Watch him always! He means you harm. He is a serpent. Watch him!"

"Thank you, Doctor," murmured Hector huskily. "You have been wonderful—the best friend I have, my only friend. But did you notice how she . . ."

"Ah, bah!" exclaimed the Doctor explosively. "You are young. Too young for this world. What could she think, suddenly faced with that article—with that jealous and odious little wretch working up the situation? Had she smiled and been quite indifferent, then you might have been miserable. But she was upset, *mon enfant*, she showed chagrin! Do you not see? May all my patients desert me if that woman—yes, that adorable woman—isn't beginning to fall in love with you."

"Ah, no, Doctor, you should not . . ."

"But it is true," shouted the Doctor, drowning the noisy rattling of the cab. "I am old and I know what I am talking about. What luck, what sacred luck! To be young, to be famous, and to be regarded with tenderness by Lina Bernay! My young friend, the gods are kind to you. Let us go somewhere and open a bottle to your good fortune and my last night in Paris."

CHAPTER XVIII

I

SENHOR FRANCISCO MARIANNO PEREIRA DE ROZA was one of those very rich South Americans who periodically descend on Paris, and by virtue of immense wealth acquired in the newer parts of the world, extract the last drop of pleasure from a city of the old world, which seems to have been specially provided by Providence to minister to those who have riches to spend and passions to gratify.

He was no stranger to Paris. In his youth he had spent several years there as a law student, and had been pleasantly known among his companions of the Latin Quarter as *le Roi des Nègres*, because of his very dark complexion and the open-handed way in which he spent the ample allowance sent him from far Brazil. Shortly after his return to Brazil in his early twenties his father had died. There were coffee plantations, cattle farms, railway enterprises and other fruitful sources of wealth to be looked after, and the careless ex-student of the Latin Quarter found himself a slave to the tiresome business of adding money to money.

After more than twenty years of married life, which had given him several lustrous-eyed children, his wife had died. Following this the Senhor had found himself thinking more and more insistently of the scenes of his younger days. The memory of them had never faded, and now an overpowering nostalgia seized him to revisit

them. He wondered whether he would be able to take up some of the threads of life where he had left them, more than a quarter of a century before. He wondered, even, whether it might make him happy to be sitting in a modest café, drinking wine that was blue and playing dominoes with happy-go-lucky companions who smoked shaggy *caporal* in large pipes. It was an absurdity, of course, but even so he dwelt on the idea.

A year or more after his wife had passed away the millionaire sailed alone for Paris, with a vague but insistent belief that somewhere and somehow in that enchanting city he might recapture something of the care-less happiness of his early days.

But it was all very different, as many a sentimental pilgrim had found before him. Fifty and more cannot reclothe itself with the ideas and habits of twenty. On his second day back in Paris he made his pilgrimage to the Faculté de Droit, and watched the students coming out of the same musty lecture rooms he had once known so well. The middle-aged millionaire sighed. He was once more or less like that. He could never be like it again; perhaps, now that he could look at twenty once more, did not want to be. There was a gulf of years between which nothing could bridge.

So, realizing that there were certain things which even his great wealth could not buy, he wisely contented himself with what was available, and found that life could still be good.

He began by taking a very impressive town residence, in the near neighbourhood of the Champs Élysées, which had just become available. It had belonged to a rich beet-root sugar refiner, recently deceased, who had caused something of a sensation by his lavish over-decoration of it, both inside and out. Senhor de Roza found it rather more ornate than he could have wished, but on the whole it pleased him very well. It had the largest private

ballroom in Paris, and in every way achieved magnificence. Nobody who lived in it could help being a notable figure.

The Brazilian was launched on his new career largely by the aid of a re-discovered friend of his early days—then a rather under-nourished and over-serious student with hopes of some modest provincial post in the Government service. But Georges Trouchet had married rather well, and his eyes had been opened to the possibilities of wealth. Politics had followed. His early modesty had been gradually replaced by a ferocious egotism. By never missing a chance of pushing himself he was now, at an early age as these things go, a financier on a fairly large scale, held a large share in a newspaper, and had already held minor posts in two Cabinets. It is true that neither of the Governments of which he had been a member had lasted for more than six weeks—these things come and go so quickly in Paris—but all the same M. Trouchet remained *Monsieur le Ministre* to all his friends.

He welcomed his old acquaintance with open arms, and made the most of their early days together. Who would not with one so rich as Senhor de Roza? With his knowledge of contemporary Paris he was able to facilitate the millionaire's social progress considerably. Within a short time the ornate mansion in the Avenue Gabriel became famous for its entertainments and the variety of people to be met there.

Senhor de Roza spent money lavishly. It was when he was on the crest of the social wave, and secretly feeling a little fatigued with his easily bought conquests and pleasure, that he first met Lina Bernay. Copper-haired beauties of her type were rare in Paris. When the dark Senhor first beheld her he felt immediately that he had met his ideal in his antithesis.

But somewhat to his surprise he found that Lina lived up to her astonishing reputation. She seemed insensible to the lure of wealth, however profusely displayed.

Senhor de Roza made little or no headway in his wooing. But such a check as this only acted as a stimulus to one who up to now had found that his riches paved an easy way to any conquest he desired.

II

Senhor de Roza was wise enough not to be too insistent in his attentions to Lina. He realized that with her victory would only come as the result of a long and patient campaign. In the meantime they were quite good friends, and he would have to be content with that for the present. It never occurred to him that he would not succeed in the long run.

Latterly he had undoubtedly scored a considerable success with her over the extraordinary affair of Hector Duval. She had simply asked him one night whether, in case she decided to take a theatre of her own and produce a play by an unknown author, in which she had great confidence, he would be prepared to back her judgment. He had assented at once, without conditions.

She had not found it necessary to take another theatre, and Senhor de Roza had not been called upon to find any money. He regretted this. But he felt that, all the same, the affair had left him with a marked advantage. It is good for a millionaire's suit that the lady should feel that he is there at any time to play the part of financial ally, without conditions. In time, any woman, however shy and elusive—and the shyer and more elusive the better—must become sensible to such a delicate air on the part of her wooer.

For some time past one of his subtle attentions to the lady he adored was to have a permanent box at the Etoile. He dropped into the theatre one evening, taking M. Troughet with him.

They had dined well, and the Brazilian had seemed in such good humour that M. Trouchet had been emboldened to put before him a business proposal which interested him very much. It was one which had the appearance of being quite a sound and attractive scheme, so that M. Trouchet was able to wax enthusiastic about it without any violation to his conscience, which is sometimes a comfort even to a financier.

The Brazilian seemed to be quite interested, in his lazy way. M. Trouchet felt that life was treating him as he deserved. Not for the first time he blessed the fortunate circumstances which had enabled him, as a result of a slender acquaintance of long ago, to be now an intimate companion of one of the richest men in Paris.

This was Trouchet's first visit to the play of the moment. He flattered himself that nobody was more in the movement than he was, but as it happened he had been away from Paris on the first night of the production. He knew exactly what to say to please his host, and exclaimed with delight as the amusing picture of life in the provinces unfolded itself. Here again he felt that life was ordered exactly as it should be. The play was distinctly good, and his ecstasies were not entirely calculated.

"Delightful! Exquisite!" he exclaimed. "And Lina! How ravishing she is. One likes her in this simple country setting as much, more even, than as the woman of the world moving in the conventional polite circles. What an artist she is! That touch of provincial accent—just enough and not too much. A shade more and it would sit too heavily on her. Delightful. And look how she twists the audience round her little finger!"

The Brazilian listened to the chorus of praise with quiet gratification. During the interval their talk fell on the author of the play.

"You have met this extraordinary person, of course," said Trouchet. "What is he like?"

"A very nice fellow indeed." You would never think he was a barber. You might certainly think he was a poet. I was amazed when I first met him. I had imagined—well, you know what. But he is calm, dignified. He is modest. He has *aplomb*. I can well understand the kind interest Lina took in him, especially after he had been so cruelly used. A dirty business. And she has been justified."

"Assuredly," assented M. Trouchet heartily. "But did not some of the newspapers suggest that she and he . . . ? I mean . . ." M. Trouchet stopped, and could have kicked himself. He felt he had made a terrible *gaffe*.

But to his relief the Brazilian laughed his low, deep laugh.

"That she was in love with him, you mean, and did all this for his *beaux yeux*. Rubbish! An invention of the newspapers to make the story more interesting. You know what the newspapers do—who better? I had that matter over with Arnaud, who was fool enough to think the same thing. But he is furious for two reasons, and is ready to think anything. He is jealous of anybody who goes near Lina, although she always keeps the little fop at arm's length. And then, he thought a play of his own was going on, and the barber's is produced instead. It was poetic justice, if you like, since Arnaud was one of those who helped to play the joke on him in the beginning."

M. Trouchet laughed heartily, much relieved.

"He has not the sense to see that it is merely her good heart," the millionaire went on, now launched on the subject dearest to him. "In the first place she was miserable at having taken part in the joke. And then, having seen how good his play was, she was determined

to see justice done to him. It appealed both to her generosity and her sense of the dramatic. Of course he is a protégé of hers, naturally. But as for anything else—nonsense.” And Senhor de Roza complacently stroked his close-cropped black beard.

“Obviously,” agreed M. Trouchet. “It would be absurd. And after all, a great artist, such as she is, is moved by impulses such as do not affect ordinary people.”

“Exactly. And by the way, I have a mind to join in this pleasant game of helping along the famous Hector—although one would say that he does not much need it now. But after all, he cannot always be writing plays. He has left his barbering behind and ought to have something definite to do. Why not put him on the staff of the *Clairon*?”

“It is an idea,” admitted M. Trouchet, with some caution.

“It is a very good idea,” the millionaire emphasized. “He is already a personality. Take him up. Make the most of him. He would be worth having on any newspaper. I am told he has written some excellent poems. Publish them. Let him write—in short, whatever he can write on a newspaper. Whatever one does write. I do not understand these things. Let him write what he pleases. His name will carry it. The public will be chiefly interested in that—the romantic author who was found by our leading comédienne.”

“Excellent. It is an idea. I will speak . . .”

“As to salary, make it something worth having and I will be responsible for that.”

“Ah, no, but no.” M. Trouchet raised a deprecating hand. “We could never permit . . .”

“But yes, but yes. This is my affair. I insist. It is for me, and the *Clairon* will have all the advantage without any risk.”

“My dear friend, if you insist . . .”

"I insist. It is my idea and I wish . . ."

"Then consider it done. I will arrange the matter immediately."

"Good. But remember you do not tell him of this arrangement. You invite him to join your paper, and discuss the matter with him in the usual way. He must know nothing of how it has come about."

"It shall be as you say. He will have no idea that you are behind it."

"Then that is settled . . . Ah, there goes the curtain. You will laugh at this act. She is adorable in this—a minx, but adorable."

The millionaire felt well content with his little idea. It would please Lina to know what he had done. He would not himself tell her of it. Perhaps it would be better for him to arrange for her to hear of it in some other way. He knew in advance that she would be mightily pleased by it. So different from the jealous and petty attitude adopted by that fool Arnaud.

III

Hector went with Dr. Lemoine to the Gare de Lyon to see him off on his long journey back to St. Médard. They talked for the last few moments through the window of the train.

"Remember all I have said," said the Doctor, bending down. "*En avant! Courage!* There is a misunderstanding between you and the divine Lina. You must not let it grow. Go to her. Explain that the interview in the *Moniteur* was a lie put there to do you harm. Insist that the little Marcelle was never more than a comrade, or at any rate that you have not treated her like a base rascal. Carry the situation by assault. Impose yourself on her. Sacred Heaven, but I have been study-

ing people for forty years or more, and if that adorable woman is not prepared to love you . . ."

"Once more, Doctor, I beg of you, do not say that. She has been kind to me, but I should be a fool . . ."

"Of course you are. Have I not maintained it a thousand times! There is nothing so foolish as youth in these matters. I am, alas, old enough to know better. But there is a pearl waiting to be gathered. I leave you a famous dramatist, with wealth and happiness to your hand. If you do not seize all that is waiting for you, then there are no words in my vocabulary to describe you. Good-bye and good luck."

The train jerked and rolled away. Hector felt depressed as he saw it disappear.

Something of his former loveliness descended on him as he took a taxi-cab back to the centre of the city. The Doctor had meant so much to him during the emotional period of the first night at the Etoile and the days following it.

He lunched early at a good café restaurant in the Rue Royale, and felt amazingly solitary amid the clatter and bustle going on around him.

It was absurd. Here he was, the author of a play which all Paris was running to see—and yet he was really alone in the whole vast city. Even the waiter who was serving him must have heard of him—who had not heard of Hector Duval by now?

He felt acutely the rift which had sprung up between his benefactress and himself, and with his over-sensitive nature was inclined to exaggerate it. He shrank from going to see her about the lying interview in the *Moniteur*. Any protestations from him on such a subject as his friendship with Marcelle would suggest an intimacy between Lina and himself which he had no right to presume. Dr. Lemoine's view on this subject, he told himself, he must regard as purely fantastic—an amiable lapse in his

old friend's otherwise remarkable sanity in all things. Otherwise he would rush into disaster. Lina Bernay, the brilliant star of the Etoile, pursued by millionaires, the embodiment of all his old dreams of fair women, in love with him! It was too absurd.

But one thing he must do at once. He must see Marcelle, and get to the bottom of that affair of the *Moniteur*; find out who had inspired the interview, and why she had lent herself to it.

It occurred to him that the day was Saturday. In about half an hour or so she would be leaving the famous Roget's, in the Rue de la Paix, free for the afternoon. He would go and wait for her, and get at the truth of that farrago of spite and lies which had represented him as a heartless betrayer of trusting maidens.

He walked up the Boulevards, turned down the Rue de la Paix and waited on the other side of the street opposite the wide *porte cochère* leading into Roget's. The little work-girls, the midinettes, of one of the most famous dressmaking ateliers in the world were already coming out, scattering in all directions in twos and threes. Then after a few minutes Marcelle came out, alone, as befitted one of her importance in the establishment. She looked singularly *chic* and graceful as she walked off—dainty in every detail, from her hat to her shoes. Marcelle was a credit to the great Roget's.

He crossed the road and his long strides soon brought him up to her.

"Marcelle!"

She turned, startled, at the sound of his voice, her pale face suddenly flushed. But she soon recovered her poise.

"You! But what a surprise! How comes it that the great author condescends to speak to me!"

He laughed at the sarcasm.

"Do not be cruel to a poor celebrity, Marcelle. I have been very busy of late, or should have come to see you

before. But there is much I want to talk to you about. . . . Come, we are both free for the afternoon. We will go for a drive in the Bois. I have lunched, but you shall have some there."

She shook her head.

"I am not free. I have some business to attend to."

He laughed again.

"I do not believe you. And in any case it must wait. Come along. I am going to take you for a drive."

"And suppose I refuse to do what the famous dramatic author tells me to do."

"Then I shall carry you off."

It was the first time Marcelle had seen him in a masterful mood, and she succumbed to it immediately—gladly, in spite of the touch of apprehension which this meeting gave her. He signalled to a passing *fiacre*, and handed her into the shabby little horsed cab.

"One cannot talk in an auto, Marcelle," he said as he settled down beside her. "One is too busy watching the pedestrian escape."

"All the same I am surprised that one so famous is content with a simple *fiacre*," she returned with another touch of malice.

"To be famous, as you call it, Marcelle, is not necessarily to be happy. Life is very complicated. Tell me, dear friend, why did you give that unfortunate interview in the *Moniteur*?"

She knew it was coming, but had not expected it quite so quickly. She tried to counter it bravely.

"And you? Why have you kept away from me all this time? And why did you keep it secret from me, your only comrade, that you were going to have a play produced at the Etoile and be a famous author? It was not nice. You might have trusted me."

"But, Marcelle, I had to keep it secret. It was a point of honour that I should tell nobody—nobody. It was a

great secret, and knowing what I did it would have been difficult to keep it from you had I seen you often. Frankly I will confess. I was so much preoccupied with what was to take place that I could really think of nothing else. I was better alone. You know me. And then—it is absurd—how did I know I was to be a famous author, as you will have it? The play might have been a failure. I dreaded it. One never knows. And then you would have had nothing with which to reproach me.”

“But yes, but yes!” she insisted vehemently. “It was that you told me nothing—that you could not trust me. Whether it was a success or a failure—a catastrophe even—what would that have mattered? But we were friends, and you told me nothing. I was ignorant of it all until I read it in a newspaper. It hurt.” There was a break in her voice. Hector feared that she was about to cry.

“But I have told you, little one, that I was allowed to tell nobody. I was forbidden to do so. I could not help myself. And now, tell me. Why did you give that extraordinary interview? Who pushed you to it? Answer me. I must know.”

“It was that . . . that,” she faltered. “Oh, but you are very cruel to-day.”

“You shall answer me, Marcelle, if we have to drive on until this poor old quadruped drops.” He gripped her wrist. “Answer me.”

Marcelle capitulated. Here was this big man she had befriended, almost mothered, showing himself for the first time to be masterful and strong.

“I did not say all that,” she murmured. “They made me say much more than I did. Much more.”

“Who made you?”

“But the newspaper—the *Moniteur*. I was horrified when I saw all they had put in. You must have known I could not have said such things.”

“Tell me how it happened—all of it.”

"Oh, dear," Marcelle sighed. "It really began with Monsieur Arnaud coming to Roget's with his *petite amie* . . ."

"Ha!"

"What is the matter?"

"Nothing. Continue!"

"Well, it was the morning after the production of the play at the Etoile, when the newspapers were full of you. I did not know anything of it until Georgette, my friend, pointed it out to me. I was very mortified that I should only learn of what had happened to you, and everything about you, through a newspaper. Then Monsieur Arnaud came in with his little *amie*, Fifi d'Artois from the Bouffes Parisiens—a doll with peroxide hair. Her mother keeps a vegetable stall at the Halles—I know all about her. She can't dance and she can't sing, but she lives like a princess. A little bare-foot she was, up at Montmartre, and now she has the effrontery to come to Roget's for her dresses, and put on all the airs of a duchess. Truly it makes one sick when one thinks of the way some women . . ."

"Yes, yes, but never mind Fifi," interrupted Hector. "There are many like her in Paris. But what about Arnaud? What did he say?"

"Well, he found I had just been reading the newspaper with columns all about you in it. Then he was surprised to find I knew you. Then in the afternoon a reporter came from the *Moniteur*. It was clear that he had come because of Monsieur Arnaud's visit. He asked me a great many questions. Perhaps I talked a little more than I should have done. But I was hurt, *mon ami*, I was hurt." She turned to him appealingly.

"Continue, Marcelle, continue!"

"But you are angry."

"No! Not at all! I am interested. Go on!"

"There is nothing more to say . . . Oh, but yes, there

is. When the interview appeared I was horrified. The reporter had said to me that nothing was known of you, and he merely wanted to find out all he could. He asked me all sorts of questions, but I saw nothing wrong in them. Then afterwards I saw that he had twisted everything I had said. When I read all that—you know—that you had deceived me and abandoned me, and been cruel—all those lies . . . well, I cried, *mon ami*. There was nothing else to do. And I wondered why you hadn't been to see me."

"Ah, the pig!" breathed Hector savagely. He was thinking of Arnaud.

"Thou sayest?" she asked timidly.

"Nothing, nothing," he answered roughly. "I was thinking of somebody. Oh, what an infamy!"

And at this Marcelle, who was not sure how much was intended for her, collapsed.

"Ah, you are cruel! Thou knowest I love thee, thou knowest I love thee." And bursting into tears, her head subsided on his shoulder.

Hector, embarrassed and startled at this development, looked round hastily. They had left the Champs Élysées behind them and were just entering on the Avenue du Bois. There were many strollers on the broad sidewalk, and motor-cars were flashing past them in both directions. He felt that a thousand eyes were converging on them.

"Come, come, Marcelle," he urged. "You must not give way like this. It is not you I am angry with. It is not your fault." He patted her hands nervously. "Come, come, all is well. It is nothing. Gently, gently! We may be seen, and then there will be another wretched article in the papers. We will drive to a restaurant in the Bois, and sit under the trees. Come, come, my little one. Calm yourself."

And with Hector feeling thoroughly alarmed, obsessed

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by the idea that the dreadful glare of publicity he was beginning to fear would find him out again, and with Marcelle struggling without much success to regain her composure, the *fiacre* rolled down the Avenue towards the Bois.

CHAPTER XIX

M. TROUCHET was not long in setting in motion the novel proposal suggested to him by Senhor de Roza.

To receive gratis a present of a distinguished addition to his literary staff was something new in journalistic subsidies, a subject on which M. Trouchet was something of an expert. The idea was obviously excellent. The *Clairon* would have all the advertisement of Hector's services free of expense. M. Trouchet found complete accord when he put the matter before his fellow directors.

So that, two days after his illuminating meeting with Marcelle, Hector found a letter waiting for him at the theatre, praying him in very polite terms to call on M. Trouchet at the offices of the *Clairon* at his earliest convenience.

He had gone to the theatre to arrange for a box for Marcelle and himself. She had shown herself very contrite and penitent about the interview in the *Moniteur*, and he felt that it was impossible to blame her either for it or its results. The fault was entirely Arnaud's, and she was equally a victim. Hector had no doubt now of Arnaud's keen and active antagonism. He felt that it was a feud which some day would come to a head.

The surprise letter from M. Trouchet excited him immensely. He felt that it could only mean one thing—that he was to be asked to write for that journal. Why else should he be asked to call? And to receive such an

invitation from a well-known Paris newspaper, even if it was not one of the very first rank, seemed to him a miracle only second to being the author of a success at the Etoile.

He decided that he would call on M. Trouchet at once, and felt that Paris was his to conquer as he walked to the offices of the *Clairon*.

He sent in his card, was ushered up with little delay, and found himself in the imposing presence of the Director of the *Clairon*. M. Trouchet was startlingly bald, with a polished cranium which reflected high lights as from a mirror. But his luxuriant moustache and whiskers compensated for any failing elsewhere. His beard was parted in the middle, and swept fiercely to right and left. His bold moustache curled upwards. It amused Hector internally that he could not refrain from taking a professional interest in these details.

M. Trouchet sat at a huge and handsome Empire desk with a glass top, garnished with many expensive trifles. Everything spoke of immense success. He was very cordial, and soon came to the point.

He had seen the play at the Etoile, and was much impressed thereby. He had been much interested, too, in Hector's sudden rise to fame, which in a night had made him a Parisian celebrity of the first order. And in these circumstances he was glad to extend a warm invitation to the author of "Juliette Shows the Way" to join the staff of the *Clairon*.

Hector was much moved by the discourse and the offer.

"It is very, very kind of you," he murmured. "I appreciate it very much. It is very flattering. But you understand, Monsieur, that I have had no experience of this kind of work. I should be quite new to it."

M. Trouchet waved a white hand and smiled indulgently.

"My dear Monsieur Duval, there is nothing to intimidate you in journalism, providing you can write.

Indeed, there are many very successful journalists who cannot even do that." And he laughed merrily. "But you have shown that you *can* write—you are the author of the biggest success in Paris. That is a great deal. Then there are your poems. I have heard of those. We could publish them from time to time. You are already a celebrity, and with the aid of the *Clairon* you would become indeed famous."

"But what should I write about?" Hector asked, with a touch of his usual timidity.

"*Ma foi*, there is no difficulty about that. Write about what you please. The theatres, art, literature, the *monde*, the *demi-monde*, politics—there is no lack. Write about Paris. Tell us what you think of us—you who have come from afar and conquered so swiftly. Make Paris, as it seems to you, your subject. Do not bother about what anybody else writes. Be yourself and nobody else. As I say you are a celebrity. Live up to it."

It was overwhelming. Hector felt moved, and inspired. Here was a chance such as he could never have dreamed of. Whatever his fate as a dramatist it linked him to Paris and literature for all time. And what more could a dramatist desire than such a literary connection, which would yet leave him free to pursue his major work?

"Truly—I do not know what to say—how to thank you. It is generous—noble."

"Then you accept?" said M. Trouchet, with another large and happy gesture.

"But with joy."

"Then that is settled. We will announce at once that you are to join the staff of the *Clairon* as one of our most distinguished writers. And now as to emoluments." M. Trouchet put his head to one side as though thinking earnestly. "Shall we say two thousand francs per month?"

"But for a beginner such as myself!" cried Hector.

"It is too much. I feel that I could not justify it." He knew a little of journalistic salaries in Paris. This was amazing.

"But for the distinguished dramatist, Monsieur Hector Duval, it is—shall we say merely adequate? Then it is understood. Ah, there is just one point. When you know your comrades of the *Clairon* it will perhaps be just as well for you not to mention the amount of your salary. I will be frank with you, Monsieur Duval. All of them are not paid so much. In you, I am paying for your fame as a dramatist, as a celebrity. But there are little jealousies in these matters. You understand. A little discretion. One has to be discreet in this life." M. Trouchet smiled winningly.

Hector smiled in return, and promised to be discreet. It seemed reasonable. It was hard, perhaps, on the others, but if Fortune insisted on smiling so effulgently on him he could not very well protest.

"Then all is settled." M. Trouchet went on. "You may begin as soon as you like—you may write about whatever you please. Whatever you see in Paris—whatever strikes you as odd, humorous, idiotic, scandalous—anything in short that interests you, write about it. Let us hear what Hector Duval thinks about it all—about us. It will be an excellent beginning."

A few more polite phrases from M. Trouchet, a cordial handshake, and Hector left the room feeling more elated than he had ever done in his life—more uplifted even than after the first night at the *Etoile*. The generosity, the geniality, the largeness, the swiftness, the magnificence of M. Trouchet overwhelmed him. He had never met anybody like him before.

"Truly it is only in Paris one could encounter a man like that," he exclaimed to himself as he strode blithely along the Boulevard.

The world was his, to do as he liked with, he felt, as

he pursued his way. He passed Polin's. The famous restaurant had always attracted him. Its discreet, sober interior, of which he had occasionally obtained a peep, through a half-opened door, the fame of its cuisine and prices, had often tempted him to enter, if only for the experience. So far he had refrained. Polin's was a resort of millionaires, crowned heads, members of the ancient aristocracy, very choice specimens of the *demi-monde* and other celebrities, and the inquiring or incautious stranger who ventured there had to pay dearly for it.

But this time Hector did not hesitate. It was a morning to be celebrated. He crossed the threshold of Polin's as though he had long been accustomed to it, and was waved to a pleasant corner seat. The *maitre d'hôtel* descended on him, supported by two waiters as acolytes, and subtly conveyed the impression that he regarded Hector as a visiting monarch, travelling incognito. In a very short time Hector had started on a lunch which really was fit for a king.

The room filled up, and he was much interested to note the many striking types, men and women, who surrounded him. No doubt he was sitting surrounded by world-wide celebrities. He wished he knew them all. What had M. Trouchet said: "Whatever you see in Paris . . . anything that interests you . . ." An idea for a first article for the *Clarion* began to shape itself in his mind.

Then he was startled and perturbed to see the two men walk in who had exercised such a potent influence on his life—de Bac and Dufayel. What an elegant and distinguished pair they made—these sprightly collaborators in the lightest of Parisian farces and comedies. Hector had not seen Dufayel since the tragic night when he first came to Paris. De Bac had more or less made his peace at the first night at the Etoile. But Dufayel! Hector felt his old, fierce anger sweeping over him once

more as he looked again on this one of the prime movers in the affair of the Café de Paris.

Gazing quizzingly round the room to see who was there before choosing their seats, de Bac caught sight of Hector. He nodded cordially, and said something to his companion. The two came forward to Hector's table. De Bac shook hands, and then Dufayel held out his hand. Hector took it, wondering uncomfortably what he ought to do in such a situation. It seemed absurd to carry on a feud now. And yet . . . Dufayel himself solved the difficulty.

"Permit me to congratulate you on your great success," he said simply. "I have been away for some weeks, but I have heard all about it. De Bac has told me how wonderfully good your play is. I hope to go and see it very soon."

In spite of himself Hector glowed at the tribute. True there was not a word from Dufayel about the part he had played in the "affaire Duval." But his regret was implied in the tone of his voice, and Hector felt that after all that had happened it was enough. There could no longer be room for ill-feeling here.

"As you are alone," de Bac followed on, "do you mind if we sit at your table? It is good for dramatists to be seen together. It shows we really have no jealousies of each other." And he laughed.

Hector assented eagerly. He felt relieved and happy to find that little or no uneasiness was apparent on either side. They began to talk, and de Bac commented amusingly on some of the people in the room, explaining who they were. Flushed by the events of the morning, and warmed by the generous wine the *maître d'hôtel* had suggested, Hector told them with frank excitement of his wonderful luck with the *Clairon*.

They were both very congratulatory.

"It is a splendid beginning," said de Bac. "You are

launched. And listen. There is something I have wanted to say for some time. We must be friends. There must be no ill-feeling for what happened. We shall both of us be glad to help you in any way we can. We have already discussed it. Is it not so?" He turned to his companion.

"But with joy," returned Dufayel warmly. "Anything we can do."

"I shall be only too happy to be friends," said Hector gratefully. He felt as though he had buried a spectre. He felt very thrilled to sit with these two famous men, on terms of friendly intercourse, their equal.

They sat long after lunch, de Bac explaining that they were both in excellent humour, as that morning they had solved a difficult problem in a new comedy which had been long bothering them.

"If the public knew what a solemn business it is to make a farcical comedy they would never laugh at one," said Dufayel feelingly.

In his mood of happiness and expansion Hector found himself telling the story of the unpleasant interview in the *Moniteur*. They made light of it.

"You must not worry about such things," de Bac said. "One cannot hope to be a celebrity in Paris without being attacked. Every man who is a success is bound to have implacable enemies. We do not bother to count ours now. We put them in our plays instead, and they come in very useful."

The afternoon was well advanced when they went out together. De Bac proposed that after a stroll they should turn into the famous Café de Venise at the apéritif hour, and introduce Hector to some of its habitués. Hector knew the Venise well by repute as the leading literary café, really the only one of its kind left, where in the late afternoon the wits, poets and critics of the day gathered to talk.

“One is always hearing,” said de Bac, as they walked there slowly, “that the Boulevards are not what they used to be—that there is nobody left who can talk, or say really spiteful things, or write a poem. It is not true. The spirit of the Boulevards cannot be dead so long as three such brilliant figures as ourselves are prepared to descend on the Venise and drink absinthe and make witty remarks while other people are making money.”

There was a gratifying chorus of greeting as the two inseparables entered this temple of the Muses. Though among the most successful of their kind, and therefore the cause of much envy in such a gathering, they had the art of being popular wherever they went. The secret of their collaboration was a mystery, although a frequenter of the Venise had once given what he said was the authentic recipe. “It is like making a salad in the family circle,” he said. “De Bac puts in a large dose of mustard, and Dufayel insists on adding the same quantity. De Bac shakes the pepper-pot, and Dufayel follows suit. The salad is served up very hot, and the public can’t have enough of it. That is all.” But the fact remained that between them the two had achieved a dozen solid successes. Such a tremendous fact could not be hurt by sarcasm.

Hector glowed at the thought that he was making his first appearance in the famous Venise in such company. He would never have dared to venture there alone.

It was a quiet and sober room they entered. There was no orchestra. The Venise did not believe in such fripperies. . . . As the last of the old literary cafés it had a tradition to cherish. Men went there to talk, to meet on a common ground of intellectual intercourse. Politics, art, the theatres and the various scandals of the day—political, artistic and theatrical—were their subjects.

This particular room at this time of day was frequented only by writers, the majority of them connected in some

way with the Paris Press, and many of them well known. All of them were in pursuit of fame and fortune in the domain of pure literature, but while waiting for it they worked for the newspapers. From four to seven they sat and talked and sipped their apéritifs. A casual observer might have wondered when they did their work. But a writer cannot always be writing—although it is equally true that the best talkers are rarely the best writers.

There were poets, literary and dramatic critics, dramatists, political writers, novelists—literary men of all kinds. Some of the dramatic critics were also dramatists of varying degrees of importance, and all the others hoped some day to become so. The hunger of these literary men to be produced in some theatre was fierce and constant, a gnawing desire which never left them. But alas! there were not a quarter enough theatres to accommodate all the tragedies, comedies and farces that lay, longing for the light, in drawers and bureaux all over Paris, from Montmartre to Montparnasse.

De Bac and Dufayel were soon engaged in a rapid cross fire of talk coming from all directions. De Bac introduced Hector to those near them. The word went round and the presence of this fantastic stranger who had achieved at a bound all that most of them had been striving for unsuccessfully for years, caused a good deal of interest, a bitter and cynical interest in many cases.

Hector found himself talking to a middle-aged man, with picturesque grey hair, whose name he had not caught.

“And so you are the true and authentic Hector Duval,” said this personage. “*Bigre*—but what luck! I never really expected to see you. You sound like something out of a *feuilleton*—too good to be true. But I saw your play. There is no doubt about it—it is quite

good for a beginner. The point is whether you will ever produce another."

Hector agreed politely that it was certainly an important point.

"Ten years ago I had a play produced. I thought my fortune was made. I had already settled on the château I was going to buy. But the play ran for two weeks, my friend, although it was a masterpiece. However, one must not praise one's own work. But the leading lady was a terror—a catastrophe. She could not act—*Dieu*, but she would have made an archangel blaspheme! She had been put there by a rich admirer, and she killed my play. Since then—but why weary you with the catalogue of blows inflicted on me by an unkind Fate?"

Hector felt sympathetic and depressed.

"Now I do the theatres for the *Clairon*. You will know my name—Lustrac."

"But of course I do—well. Then we are *confrères*."

"*Confrères*? How?"

"I was this morning invited to join the staff of the *Clairon*."

"Poor devil! Then you are going to work for a crowd of pigs!"

Hector opened his eyes at this.

"But on the contrary, Monsieur Trouchet, whom I saw this morning, was most charming in every way."

"Trouchet. Ha, ha!" Lustrac threw his head back and roared. "Oh, don't I know him, that precious rascal. Ha! ha! A bad lot, my friend. The typical *arriviste*. There is nothing he hasn't dabbled in—finance, politics, newspapers. Ah, we have too many like him in Paris. The Chamber of Deputies is stuffed with them. He would sell his grandmother to advance his own interests."

Hector was astounded.

"But I am sure you are wrong. I have never met a man who impressed me more by his qualities."

Lustrac shook his head, pityingly.

"My dear confrère—since you say you are now one of us—I know his career from the beginning. It is one long chapter of climbing up on other people's backs. And he never looks behind him. He says adieu for ever to those who have once served him—unless he thinks they may be useful again, which is unlikely in his case, because nobody ever risks him twice. He obtained his interest in the *Clairon* through his wife. Now he deceives her, flagrantly. One expects a little of that, of course. Men are not saints. But there should be limits, and he has none. The *Clairon* helps him on the Bourse and in the Chamber. Trouchet has only one price for anything he has to sell—the highest he can get. He has only one price for his employees. The lowest he can give. Oh, don't I know him. At present he is licking the boots of this Brazilian millionaire, de Roza. Ah, there is nothing you can tell me about the excellent Trouchet. He is a dirty type, I tell you."

Hector felt bewildered and distressed. He was thoroughly unhappy that one who had been so charming to him a few hours ago should thus be brutally torn to shreds. The worst of it was that Lustrac talked in such a way as carried some conviction. But Hector felt that loyalty demanded that he should refuse to accept all this.

"I regret to hear all that you have told me," he said. "I can only repeat that I saw Monsieur Trouchet but a few hours ago, that he was very charming, and that I could not help feeling the highest opinion of his manner and qualities."

Lustrac was quite unaffected by this.

"That is because you are young, and new to all this," he replied simply. "I have had thirty years on the Boulevards, and I know them inside out. I know the history of Trouchet almost as well as I know my own."

"Listen and I will tell you a story about him."

Lustrac stirred meditatively the glass of opalescent absinthe that was before him, and took a sip before beginning.

"Years ago, it must be twelve or more, before our excellent Trouchet had quite found his feet, but was already doing very well, he conceived a transient passion for a young person at the Folies Bergères. She could not dance or sing or act, to any noticeable extent, but she had a superb figure, of which she showed large quantities every evening, and naturally this went a long way at the Folies Bergères. Equally naturally she was already provided with a lover, who was a comedian of sorts.

"Our Trouchet succeeded in his amorous plans, but he had not laid them quite so carefully as he imagined. One afternoon, between the classic hours of five and seven, the door of the hotel bedroom in which he was dallying was suddenly burst open with a crash, and Trouchet, in a state of considerable undress, found himself looking at the comedian whom he had temporarily dispossessed of the affections of his adored one. As is so often the case with comedians in private life, this one looked deadly serious. Moreover, he produced a revolver from his pocket and pointed it at the man who had robbed him of that which, no doubt, was the dearest thing he had ever possessed.

"Mark now the quality of our Trouchet in a crisis, and see how a gift for finance helps such a man in any extremity. Scorning all convention he bounded instantly to the floor and cried: 'I buy that revolver, on the spot. The price, twenty-five thousand francs!'

"Money has power, at whatever time and in whatever circumstances employed, and twenty-five thousand francs is a great deal of money. The revolver wavered in this tragic comedian's hand. Then it drooped.

"'I accept,' said the unhappy man with a scornful laugh. '*She* may not be worth so much money,' and he

waved his other hand at the woman who had deceived him.

‘But the revolver is. Have you the money on you?’

“The good Trouchet, now, as his financier’s instinct told him, completely master of the situation, lifted a deprecating hand and laughed.

“‘My good friend,’ he said, ‘even I do not carry so much money on me. But let me see what is in my pocket-book.’ And with that he approached his outer garments, and extracted from his pocket-book some two thousand francs. ‘This is all I have with me. Take it on account.’

“Even such a sum as this seemed enormous wealth to our poor comedian, whose name was Roulbot. He took possession of it with a certain haste. At the same moment profiting by Roulbot’s pardonable emotion at feeling so much money at one time, Trouchet deftly secured the revolver. Then at once turning it against his victim he, ordered him out of the room, told him that if he made the slightest show of resistance he would shoot him, threatened him with the police were he not out in the street in five seconds, and further swore that if he made the slightest trouble about the matter in the future he would have him barred from every theatre and music-hall in Paris. At which the poor man disappeared through the doorway, beaten, as every ordinary man must be, by the astuteness of the financial mind, and having sold his honour for a paltry two thousand francs.”

Lustrac, having finished, took another sip at his absinthe, a longer one this time.

“That,” he added, “gives you some faint idea of what sort of rascal our Trouchet is.”

“It showed at any rate a certain presence of mind,” Hector said, feeling that he was still called upon to make some sort of defence.

“Bah! It simply showed that natures like his believe that anybody can be bought by money—and as a rule

they are right. But some day I will tell you more about Trouchet. I could write a book on him."

Hector felt bewildered. He hardly knew what to make of the fantastic story he had just been told. It sounded absurd, and yet it seemed as though it might be true. He was quite distressed that one who had been so charming to him a few hours before should be thus brutally torn to shreds. No one man could be as M. Trouchet had been that morning, and as Lustrac now painted him. And yet Lustrac talked in such a way as carried some conviction.

Hector was happy to see that just then his two friends stood up to depart, and he went out with them, with a parting word from Lustrac to come and see him there again, when he would tell him more.

"You are now enrolled in the amusing and more or less distinguished company of the habitués of the Venise," said de Bac as they gained the Boulevard. "It is a useful and interesting place—in moderation. You must certainly show yourself there from time to time."

Hector mentioned Lustrac. An interesting man—most curious.

De Bac laughed.

"For heaven's sake don't take anything he says too seriously," de Bac said. "Years ago—ten or it may have been twenty—he had a play produced, nobody knows why. It was a bad play, and died an early death. But Lustrac is still convinced that he is one of the great dramatists of the day, and cannot understand why he has not been allowed to repeat indefinitely his early indiscretion. He is that most dangerous member of society, a disappointed man—worse, a disappointed dramatist. And then one simply never knows how much to believe of what he says. If he was as great a romancer in his study as he is in a café he might be a great man. Perhaps it is the absinthe."

"Ah, that explains it," said Hector eagerly. "He was saying some very terrible things about M. Trouchet. About him using everybody ruthlessly for his own ends—oh, and much worse than that. I was really very much embarrassed."

De Bac felt his chin and looked quizzingly at Dufayel, who laughed. Then de Bac shrugged his shoulders.

"My dear friend, you will no doubt find Trouchet perfectly charming for a certain time—that is sure. How long it will last will depend on circumstances. He undoubtedly has a way of getting the most out of people. Lustrac did not exaggerate there. The only thing for you to do is never to forget that, and to determine to get the most out of Trouchet. Be very clear about that."

Hector nodded, feeling considerably disillusioned with life.

"By the way," de Bac went on, "in what quarter are you living?"

For a moment Hector was confused. Then he laughed frankly.

"I am still living in the little room in a small Montmartre hotel where I first went. Right away near the top. I am afraid it is not a very good address."

De Bac shook his head.

"You ought to be somewhere nearer the centre of the world than that," he said. "Montmartre is all right when you are struggling. Not when you have arrived."

"I know the very thing for you," put in Dufayel. "An excellent little apartment, just near the Chamber. If you like I will make inquiries for you. It would be a prize if you could get it."

Hector thanked him, and then took cordial leave of his new friends. He felt the spell of their distinguished acquaintance hovering round him as he walked away. They had been charming. All rancour had been completely wiped out. It was something to know two

such men in Paris. And how puzzling human nature was. Up to a little while ago he had regarded them as two inhuman wretches who had amused themselves by making a mock of one less fortunate than themselves. And now he felt that they were not only charming but kind.

But he was also considerably disturbed. The revelations he had heard about M. Trouchet—at least partly confirmed by the ambiguous attitude of his two friends—remained as something of a shock. He had a feeling that his real education in Parisian life had only begun with his visit to the Café de Venise. And there was now in his mind a lurking suspicion of M. Trouchet's motives. There was almost a suggestion that it was the old story all over again—except that such a thing would now be out of the question. It would not be possible to play twice over the great joke of the “affaire Hector Duval.”

CHAPTER XX

IN spite of the many preoccupations of a man of wealth and fashion Senhor de Roza did not forget the question of Hector and the *Clairon*. A few days after M. Trousset had reported to him the happy outcome of the interview the millionaire saw the first article over Hector's name.

Senhor de Roza read it through very carefully. It was a rather fanciful sketch of Polin's. The average Parisian journalist would as soon have thought of writing of the dome of the Invalides as of Polin's. One was almost as hoary and familiar an institution as the other. But Hector had frankly dealt with his subject as one who was a stranger to the inner life of Paris, and to whom all this was a novelty, and it needed only this touch of moral courage to make it interesting.

Senhor de Roza decided that the article was well and engagingly written. In short, he felt that the debut of the young man as a professional journalist had been a decided success.

The millionaire had just come from his bath, and was now reclining on a low divan—the half-hour of the day he appreciated most of all. The Oriental bath—a massive tank of purple marble sunk in a floor of rose mosaic—was one of the chief glories of the mansion in the Avenue Gabriel. It was here that the millionaire transacted much of his business. Acting on impulse, as he often did, he

reached out for the telephone and asked to be put through to M. Trouchet.

Somewhere else in the mansion a secretary executed the command. The Director of the *Clairon* was delighted at being disturbed so early by the millionaire. He very cordially agreed with Senhor de Roza's view that Hector's first contribution was a success, and rose eagerly to the task of bestowing praise where it was desired.

"I am delighted you think so," he said in his most engaging tones. "As a beginning it could not be better. The article is not enormous. It is not terrific. But it is very good. It has an air. It will please the public. And we have another in hand which is even better—a little sketch of the Café de Venise. Excellent, but excellent, I tell you. He can write, this young man. Very sympathetic. He has a touch for hitting off Paris—the things we are all so used to, but which remain full of interest. I foresee that a series on these lines will be very successful, while he is finding his feet. And then his poems. We shall publish some of those soon. Oh, he will not be short of publicity."

"Then you regard the experiment as likely to be successful?"

"But without the shadow of a doubt, my dear friend. It was a most happy idea on your part. A thousand thanks for finding such a valuable contributor—and on such terms."

M. Trouchet, in fact, once launched, could not voice his enthusiasm too highly. And as is often the case with very rich or powerful men who go out of their way to set small events in motion in which they have a strictly personal interest, the Brazilian felt pleased with his *flair* in thus discovering a recruit for the literature of journalism. It is sometimes as gratifying to be successful in small things as in important ones.

Then the conversation over and M. Trouchet dismissed,

Senhor de Roza lay back on his divan and put the matter from his mind. He had many other things to think about. And as the blue smoke from his cigarette curled upwards it occurred to him, as it had done many times before, that it is but an empty thing to play the sultan when the most desired sultana is not there.

More and more, latterly, he had been wondering whether it would not be better simply to marry again. This thought always comforted him, because he felt that if it came to an ultimate trial of strength Lina could not possibly refuse him for a husband. There were many millionaires in Paris, reckoned on the basis of a franc. But millionaires of his own quality computed on any basis of currency were rare. Moreover, if he married Lina she certainly would not consent to exile herself in Brazil. It would be an excellent reason for his continued residence in Paris, however urgent the call of business affairs might be from Brazil. . . . Yes, the idea of marriage had much to recommend it.

Another matter which preoccupied him was the approaching Grand Prix. He had had considerable good fortune with his racing stable, and had been quite pleased about it in a rather *blasé* way. But in his beautiful filly La Blonde he really seemed to have an excellent chance of winning the classic event of the year. La Blonde's chances were more and more fancied day by day, and the greater the hope of winning the race seemed to be, the more ardently the Brazilian wished to be successful.

It was largely a means to an end. He now thought of everything only as it would affect his suit with this rather incomprehensible, rather aloof beauty who had so enslaved him. And he counted on the glory of being the owner of a Grand Prix winner as a factor in his favour. He believed that women are always susceptible to power and success, no matter in what way these may be manifested.

He intended to run down to Chantilly that morning, to visit his racing stables and hear the latest news about La Blonde. It was a lovely day. Why not ask Lina to accompany him? She had seemed latterly to betray some interest in his chances for the race. But it was a little early to ring her up yet, and for an hour Senhor de Roza busied himself and two secretaries with letters newly arrived from Brazil, feeling thoroughly bored with such things as coffee plantations, cattle ranches and railway shares.

As soon as he judged the moment propitious he got into communication with Lina's maid and gave his message. And Marie, who latterly had found good reason to consider this particular millionaire a generous one, hastened away to present his case as attractively as possible.

In a little while he heard Lina's voice at the telephone.

"Ah, Venus herself speaks," he cried, delighted. "Tell me what do you think of my idea?"

"Charming—but I have a sort of engagement for lunch."

"Oh, but if it is not very important do put it off," he pleaded. "I feel you will bring luck to La Blonde if you visit her in her home. Just one gentle pat from you, and I feel sure she will beat the English horse. It will be a patriotic act on your part. Do come."

"It is a powerful appeal," replied Lina with a laugh which was music to the millionaire. "All right. I'll come. I will be ready in half an hour—or a little more."

"I shall be there," he returned joyously. And in a few moments the great mansion was pulsating with life and energy, all directed to the great purpose of turning out its master clothed, booted, gloved and hatted as he should be.

The sun was shining from a cloudless July sky, and Paris was looking her best as his big, shining automobile

swung majestically into the Champs Élysées. The millionaire had put the cares of great possessions behind him. He was going to meet Lina, and he felt as happy as an ardent youth setting out to see his first love.

CHAPTER XXI

I

HECTOR awoke from an untroubled sleep filled with a feeling of great content. For a few moments he lay quietly wondering what it was that so comforted him. Then he remembered. Of course it was the *appartement*.

Nothing, in a material way, had ever pleased him so much in his life as the new quarters Dufayel had found for him. He had now been in them for more than a week, and was beginning to feel thoroughly settled down. The flat comprised four rooms: a pleasant sitting-room, a bedroom, a kitchen, and a further small chamber which Hector, as all good Frenchmen do, called his *cabinet de travail*. This room contained as chief article of furniture an imposing writing-desk. It was not so magnificent as the one at which he had first seen M. Trouchet seated, but it was very fine, and he never sat down at it without a thrill of pride and satisfaction.

The flat had charmed him at first sight. Dufayel had been right in saying that he was lucky to get it. It was the very place for a writing man to make his own. It was on the fifth floor, and from his lofty balcony there was a delightful view which gave him a peep over the Seine, with the Tuileries Gardens beyond. There was no lift, for which he was glad. He preferred to climb up to his *cyrrie*. Once there, content enveloped him. It was the

refuge of a true Parisian. It was the first habitation he had possessed in which he felt really at home in his surroundings.

For his furnishing he had gone boldly to a first-class establishment, deciding that this was a moment to do things really well. The bill for his four rooms had been considerable, but he felt that the result more than justified it.

Now as he lay luxuriously in bed, after the first moment of waking, he listened to the pleasant noises of the *femme de ménage*, who visited him every morning, prepared his coffee and rolls, did the cleaning up and dusting, and departed after abstracting small quantities of provisions, as such ladies in Paris always feel they have a right to do with gentlemen who live alone.

Hector rose, splashed about in a slipper bath, called *un tub*, and dressed. The *tub* was directly due to de Bac. He was a very modern Frenchman, and in some ways was a convert to Anglo-Saxon ideas. The one drawback to the flat, he had explained, was that it had no bathroom. Since there was no bath it was necessary that Hector should provide himself with *un tub*. He never got into it without feeling how fortunate it was that he had found such friends.

This was to be a great day. "All Paris" would be at the Grand Prix, and he was to be there with the rest, and write one of his articles on it for next day's *Clarion*. He was now a unit in "All Paris." He had his definite place in that varied world. Affairs with the *Clairon* had gone very well. So far M. Trouchet had been nothing but urbanity and warm appreciation. Hector's glimpses of Parisian life had been quite a success, and although his articles still gave him much labour to compose he felt a growing confidence in himself.

He had promised to take Marcelle to the Grand Prix. It meant little to him, but he was aware that it meant

much more to her. Dimly he felt that if Lina saw him with Marcelle at Longchamps it might serve to confirm the wrong impression she had already received. . . . But why cherish absurd and impossible dreams? he told himself every time such thoughts came into his head. And he could not now refuse the friendship of one who had been his comrade during a difficult and unhappy period.

He sat down at his desk after his light breakfast and tried to do some work on the rough idea of a new comedy which had been shaping itself in his mind. But the sun was shining and he felt disinclined for work. He went out on to the balcony and watched the busy traffic of the quais and the river. The pleasure steamboats were already well filled, taking Parisians to the resorts down the river. He saw in his mind's eye ten thousand couples wandering through the woods at Meudon, St. Cloud and elsewhere. It was a day on which he should be happy and jolly like everybody else. He went and dressed with care for the great day.

He met Marcelle at the Metro Station near the Opéra, as they had arranged. Hector uttered an exclamation of admiration at her smart and dainty appearance as she came walking up the steps. Marcelle knew how to dress, and had every opportunity of gratifying her tastes at Roget's.

"But how smart you are!" he cried. "You are a picture."

She was delighted at his praise, and drew attention to her sunshade, the very latest production of its kind.

"When we go into the enclosures," she laughed, "we must look our best. There will be plenty of competition. And you . . . you look, shall I say like a Cabinet Minister?"

Hector, indeed, in his new silk hat and well-cut

morning coat, with a smart cane and light gloves, looked decidedly impressive.

After this exchange of compliments they decided on an immediate lunch. Already a stream of vehicles of all kinds was rolling towards the races, but they had plenty of time, and sat at the window of a Boulevard restaurant in full view of all that was going on.

Lunch over they bargained for a taxi-cab, and tried to bring some show of reason into the unjust demands of the driver.

"Not a franc less," grunted the driver. "It is the Grand Prix."

"But what you ask is infamous," Marcelle cried hotly.

"No, it is the Grand Prix," was the reply. And it being impossible to get any more—or less—out of him they had to give way.

They joined in the rushing tide of motor traffic that was sweeping irresistibly up the polished surface of the Champs Élysées and after an exciting, joyous journey, surrounded by vehicles of all descriptions, containing laughing, happy people, drew up outside the race-course at Longchamps.

Marcelle had been to the Grand Prix before, but was just as excited as if it was her first experience. For Hector it was all new. They were both enchanted with the sight as they walked on the soft carpet of the green lawns. All the fashionable people and all the beautiful women in the world seemed to be gathered there. Marcelle eagerly pointed out the mannequins from the various well-known dressmaking houses, and loyal to her own *maison* found no other creations to equal Roget's.

There were officers in brilliant scarlet and sky-blue uniforms; beautiful women in bewitching toilettes who were not mannequins, elegant men in silk hats and well-cut clothes, all moving ceaselessly up and down the flower-

studded lawns, beneath the green of the trees. It was a sight to charm and inspire, and Hector felt uplifted that he and his companion should take their places so naturally in this scene of splendour and fashion.

They examined the party in the Presidential box, watched the busy queues of people staking their money at the booths of the *Pari Mutuel*, joined with the rest in commenting on the parade of beautiful, sleek horses before each race, and in every way thoroughly enjoyed themselves. For them as for many more, the racing was only incidental to the brilliant pageant of wealth and beauty.

The race for the *Grand Prix* itself approached, and a fever of excitement swept over the multitude. From the packed thousands in the *pelouse*, where high hopes hung on a five or ten franc bet, to the fashionable crowds in the stands and enclosures everybody was asking the same question—would *La Blonde* beat her English rival? Everybody was agreed that the race lay between the two. The name of *de Roza* was heard everywhere.

Hector felt that the occasion demanded something startling. They hurried off to the *Pari Mutuel*, and he placed a hundred francs for each of them on the Brazilian's horse. Then with many others they climbed to the top of the grandstand, exclaimed at the wonderful view spread out before them, and joined in the roar of the multitude as the horses started for the great race.

They danced about in excitement with the rest, craned their necks, shouted incoherent remarks, gave themselves up wholly to the delirious excitement of the moment. The horses thundered along the straight in a gaily-coloured bunch. There came a culminating crash of sound as the field swept past the post, and they understood from the frantic shouts of those around them that *La Blonde* had just scraped home. The owner might be a Brazilian,

and the jockey an Irishman, but the horse was French.

"The English horse is beaten!" was the comforting thought that fired many a patriotic breast.

II

The crowds streamed off the grandstands into the paddock again to greet the winner. Soon La Blonde appeared, led by Senhor de Roza. The eyes of the Brazilian were shining with triumph and happiness at the enthusiastic ovation of the crowd. In one glorious moment he had become a personage of real importance in the social world of Paris.

Hector and Marcelle hurried off to collect their winnings, and found themselves in a long queue of people engaged on the same happy quest. The favourite had won, and its owner was looked upon almost as a public benefactor. On all hands they heard his name spoken with respect and admiration.

They returned gaily to the lawns, feeling that horse-racing was a simple and enchanting pursuit.

And there they ran right into a group standing just outside the weighing enclosure. Senhor de Roza was talking excitedly and happily, with Lina standing by his side. M. Trouchet, Arnaud and a few others were listening with great deference to the man of the moment.

"This way," said Hector hurriedly, to Marcelle, turning quickly to escape them. But M. Trouchet had espied them, and M. Trouchet was in the gayest spirits, having won heavily on La Blonde. He stepped out from the group, stretched out a hand and brought Hector and his companion into the circle.

Hector found himself facing Lina—for the first time

since that affair of the interview. She held out her hand to him, and greeted him cordially . . . but he wondered if she was quite the same. Senhor de Roza stopped for a moment in his talk concerning the great and happy event to shake hands with Hector, and went on with his discourse.

"But where have you been all this time?" asked Lina. "One would say you had deserted the Etoile."

She seemed to him to be impossibly beautiful in her Grand Prix toilette, and Hector's head swam a little as he looked at her.

"I have been very busy," he answered lamely, feeling, he did not know why, that he cut an awkward figure in this brilliant group. He would have been amazed had he known that Lina was thinking how well and distinguished he looked and that, compared with the other men standing there he showed that race will tell, even though it is exemplified in a barber. His silk hat and well-cut morning coat affected her much as her own beautiful clothes troubled him.

He presented Marcelle, hardly knowing what he said as he did so.

"You are an old friend of Monsieur Duval's," he heard Lina say, as though it were a voice coming to him in a dream. Marcelle was flushed with excitement at this unexpected meeting. She looked very charming, and Hector fancied that Lina looked at her with the keenest interest behind her smile.

His one desire was to extricate himself from a situation which embarrassed him. The presence of Arnaud, whose eyes he had carefully refrained from meeting, was a torment. Arnaud had engaged Marcelle in a bantering conversation, in which there was much reference to Roget's. Hector stood a little to one side, listening absently to M. Trouchet's comments on Senhor de Roza's great triumph.

"By the way," said M. Trouchet suddenly, "you have heard of the great midnight fête he is organizing to celebrate his victory? No? But everybody is already talking about it. Messengers have been sent off post haste to Paris. Orchestras, flowers, waiters, actors, singers—everything is being found at a moment's notice. Ah, the power of money, and success! Everybody that is anybody wants to come. I, myself, only suggested it to him the moment the race was run, and already you would think it had been the talk of Paris for six months. You must come. I will speak to him at once."

Hector made a gesture as if to restrain him, but already M. Trouchet was speaking in the millionaire's ear. Senhor de Roza nodded cordially in Hector's direction, and M. Trouchet was back at his side, all animation and enthusiasm.

"You are to come." He spoke as if it were the command of an emperor. "And you are to bring Mademoiselle. I will tell her." He turned with the same impetuosity towards Marcelle.

Senhor de Roza briskly proposed at that moment that the party should return to his box. He had a horse running in the next race.

"You are coming with us?" Lina asked Hector as the group prepared to move away.

"Thank you, but I must get back to Paris. I have some work to do. But perhaps we shall meet to-night. I understand there is to be a great celebration to which I have been commanded. No doubt you will be there."

"I hope to be—after I have finished my modest labours in a certain play which you must really come and see some day . . . Till to-night, then." And she held out her hand with a smile which he found a little puzzling.

He was still anything but himself. He felt in a tumult.

It was absurd, but he felt that Lina must now have a very definite opinion of his relations with Marcelle. Their visit to the Grand Prix together must have confirmed it in her eyes.

Marcelle, a little regretful that Hector had not accompanied the party to their box, was bubbling over with excitement at the idea of the night's festival.

"That charming Monsieur Trouchet," she exclaimed. "He asked me so nicely. And guess what he said. He said that he must compliment you on your taste in friends."

"Naturally," he replied with a grave smile.

They left before the races were over, to avoid the rush. On the way back to Paris he arranged with Marcelle how he should meet her to take her to the Brazilian's surprise reception.

He was glad that the excuse of his work would enable him for the time being to be alone. She suggested accompanying him, and waiting until he had finished, but he pointed out with truth that the fact that she was waiting until he had written his article would probably mean that he would never be able to do it.

He left her in the taxi at the Place de la Concorde, and walked the short distance to his flat. He felt anything but inspired as he sat down at the imposing writing-desk in his little study.

Fate seemed to be playing with him, as usual. Lina would see him again with Marcelle that night. Yes, she would come to only one conclusion. His eyes flamed as he conjured up before him the dapper figure of Arnaud, the cause of it all, dancing attendance on Lina that afternoon.

To Hector a situation which Arnaud himself would have dismissed with a shrug and a smile seemed full of difficulty. He felt desperately that he could see no way out of it. He was in that classic dilemma, between two

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women! It was all a misunderstanding. Yet he could not explain.

With a sigh he picked up a pen, trying to shut the subject out of his mind, and concentrate on his article on the Grand Prix.

CHAPTER XXII

IN spite of the hurry with which it was arranged—perhaps because of it—Senhor de Roza's reception in honour of his victory in the Grand Prix was the most successful of all his entertainments in the imposing mansion of the Avenue Gabriel.

The guests had all been caught on the wing—many of them in and around the paddock immediately after the race. But in addition telegrams, *petits bleus* and telephone messages had been sent all over Paris. Two private secretaries had returned to town immediately the decision was taken and had organized a score of activities. It was a desperate enterprise, but the word had gone forth, and failure was not to be thought of. Rather was it to be something exceptional—improvised, but brilliant.

On their way back to Paris in the procession of rushing automobiles the two secretaries had discussed all the possibilities. There was Marly, the leading tenor at the Opéra. He would certainly come, at a price. There was Cavalazzi, the famous Italian *diva*. She might be difficult, as she was very rich and very haughty. There were a number of members of the Etoile company, who were to be seen about the playing of a one-act comedy. That would be easy. There were the orchestras. The Café de Paris must be mobilized to do miracles with the buffet . . . The secretaries had *carte blanche* and time was their only enemy.

The hour, midnight, was a popular one, and from then onwards "all Paris" streamed in from a hundred other gatherings and entertainments.

Hector was amazed by the brilliance and animation of the scene as a little after that hour he entered with Marcelle into the Brazilian's mansion. It seemed impossible that all this had originated but a few hours ago in the fertile brain of M. Trouchet.

The crowd pressed round a monster buffet, loaded with good things, and the frequent pop of champagne corks punctuated the general hum of conversation. There were two orchestras, one red-coated and the other in plain evening dress. Many people were already dancing in the ballroom, which was in sympathetic size and splendour with the rest of the de Roza mansion.

For a time they wandered round together, feeling more like onlookers than guests. But in a little while Hector found himself nodding and bowing here and there. . . . It was pleasant to think that he was now not altogether a stranger amid this gathering of smart Parisians.

They found themselves in a tide of people setting toward the ballroom. The famous Cavalazzi sang, and there was frantic applause. Everybody seemed to be given up to a delirium of excitement and enjoyment. Hector's moodiness was swept away in the all-pervading emotion. They visited the buffet—an enterprise from which he had at first shrunk. But a host of smart people were pressing round it eagerly—even over-eagerly—and he foraged gallantly for Marcelle, finding ices and biscuits and champagne. After that they really felt they were one with the chattering multitude around them.

Leaving the buffet they ran into Arnaud. Hector was passing on, with the stiffest of bows, but, to his amazement, Arnaud greeted them both with the greatest cordiality, and had carried Marcelle off to dance almost before he realized what had happened.

She was flushed with excitement when she came back to him.

"It is unfortunate that you do not dance," she said. "He dances divinely, Monsieur Arnaud." She was bubbling over with the joy of the moment. "And he told me something *very* interesting. He said that it was owing to Senhor de Roza that Monsieur Trouchet asked you to join the *Clairon*. It is a great secret. Monsieur Trouchet only told Monsieur Arnaud this afternoon, just after he had drawn his winnings on the Grand Prix. Senhor de Roza proposed it and arranged it at his own expense, because he wanted to please Lina Bernay. Monsieur Arnaud said he thought it was very nice and generous of Senhor de Roza."

She chatted on. The blow caught him quite unprepared. It left him stunned and shaken. It seemed to knock the bottom out of his present desirable existence.

It explained his own luck with the *Clairon*. It explained Trouchet, whom he now saw revealed in a flash. All that the extraordinary man Lustrac had told him in the Café de Venise had been the simple truth. And he himself was merely a pawn in a pleasant game played for his own ends by the millionaire, who was using him, indeed, as a means to win Lina! Was there to be no end to this topsy turvy game that Fate seemed to be playing with him?

And Arnaud, Arnaud—it was always Arnaud. He felt he could kill him. He walked slowly round with Marcelle, from room to room. Her chatter blended with the hum of the multitude round him; the whole thing seemed stupid and meaningless. . . . What was he doing here as a sort of guest of a man who had secretly purchased a position for him as a means to his own ends? It was the end of the *Clairon*, anyhow.

It seemed like Fate again that at that moment Arnaud should appear before them. . He was crossing in front of

them, from one group to another, and was smiling happily, including them in his all-embracing urbanity.

Acting blindly on the impulse of his rage and disillusion, Hector seized him firmly by the wrist as he passed. Arnaud looked at him in surprise. The three were a tiny compact island in the middle of a sea of people passing to and fro.

"You told Mademoiselle something to-night about the *Clairon* which no doubt you intended she should repeat to me. She has done so. Is it true, or are you lying again, as you have done before about me?"

Arnaud's face darkened.

"Name of God! Release my hand," he growled out savagely.

Hector's grip tightened.

"You are becoming a burden to my existence, Monsieur. I know all about your machinations in that lying interview. I warn you that if you do not cease your attentions to my career I shall kill you."

Hector glared down from his superior height. His words, though vibrant with anger, were spoken in low tones. They might almost have been engaged in the same kind of small talk that was now being exchanged among a hundred others round about them.

A slow, mocking smile crept over Arnaud's face.

"You must see that you place me in an awkward position," he sneered. "It is not easy for one to fight a barber—even one who is so excellently disguised as you are." He looked Hector up and down insolently. "However, you are also a playwright, is it not? That makes it a little easier."

"I will make it still easier for you," Hector said savagely. "The condescension will be on my side. I will show precisely what I think of you." And releasing Arnaud's wrist he brought up his hand and smacked him smartly across the face with his loose glove.

Arnaud quivered with anger. There was a feral light in his glaring eyes. The incident had been noticed. People were staring, amazed. There was a sudden hum of comment on the surprising incident.

"Merci!" hissed Arnaud, with a sharp nod of the head which seemed like satisfaction. "You could not have done better. You shall hear from me very soon."

"It is well," said Hector, with an ironical half bow. They separated.

"But you are not going to fight a duel," came like a frightened sigh from Marcelle. Her face was pale and anxious, and she suddenly clung to his arm. "Ah, but you must not, you must not. Men like that are trained. They are dangerous."

"My dear Marcelle, there are many worse things than a duel, and I have experienced them since I came to Paris," said Hector calmly. He felt almost joyful in the sudden relief of having at last come to grips with Arnaud. "Come, let us go to the buffet again. We will drink our host's champagne, and be as happy as all the others. And then I must look for my friends de Bac and Dufayel. I shall need their help to arrange this little affair."

"Oh, my God, happy!" she murmured. She walked along with him feeling that the lights had suddenly dimmed, that the strains of music were a wail. She was terrified by the eyes of Arnaud, and the hate that had flared out of them. She felt as she walked with this tall man, who meant so much to her, that he was merely walking to his doom.

CHAPTER XXIII

• • I

Down the sunlit Champs Élysées, on the morning following Senior de Roza's celebration of his Grand Prix victory, two men were walking—two men markedly elegant and distinguished. The sunlight glittered on their polished silk hats, and showed to advantage every detail of their carefully chosen attire—gloves, cravats, light waistcoats, creased trousers and highly varnished boots blending into a gracious and harmonious whole.

They were MM. de Bac and Dufayel. As man and wife who have long and harmoniously lived together are said gradually to resemble each other, so de Bac and Dufayel, as a result of long and successful literary collaboration, seemed each to have imparted something of himself to the other. And now the picture of elegance, as befitted their grave and important errand, they were still in close collaboration in an affair which was affecting both with equal seriousness.

“There are three kinds of duels,” de Bac was saying. “There are duels that are farcical, duels that are accidentally dangerous, and duels that are meant to be so. There is no doubt as to which category this one belongs.”

They had only just met, following the appeal Hector had made the night before to act for him in the crisis which had come to him, and they were now on their way to a formal conference with the seconds of the “opposing

party," there to arrange the details of an encounter on the morrow. They did not relish the situation in which they had been placed, but Hector having appealed to them they felt they could not refuse. They owed him something and this was the time to repay it.

There are many duels in which the rôle of the seconds is merely a matter of ceremony. There are a few others in which from the first it threatens to become a grave responsibility. This was one.

"What a pity the excellent Hector was ever brought to Paris," de Bac went on as they drew nearer to the scene of their appointment. "One can almost see the hand of Fate in all this. It is as though the spirit of justice is at work. We bring him here for our own amusement—and now we have this affair on our hands. True he has had amazing good fortune in the interval. But what is the use of that if Arnaud is determined to finish him to-morrow?"

"We must not take that for granted," cried Dufayel.

"Ah—bah! You and I know the situation. I don't like it. I wish it were already to-morrow afternoon, and that all was well. . . . I seem to have heard something very like that said before."

"The fat Falstaff said something on those lines—in Shakespeare."

"Ah! How true it is that there is nothing new."

"In any case," said Dufayel, "it must be pistols. That we must insist on. It is his only chance. With swords it would be only a massacre. Arnaud is very strong at fencing. With pistols there is always the bare chance that the good shot just misses and that the bad shot just gets there. . . . But I don't like it, my old one. I don't like it. Why the devil did Hector give him the opportunity!"

"It's not his fault, it's that damned fool Arnaud," growled de Bac. "He is the real aggressor. He has

been provocative all along. He foams at the mouth, even to this day, at the thought that Hector's play was produced instead of his own. You were not there at the first night at the Etoile. Why, the man could hardly contain himself. And apparently he also believes that Hector is a rival with the fair Lina. Fantastic, eh? There is a woman in it you see—inevitably. I don't suppose Arnaud ever dreamed it would come to a duel. But when the opportunity presented itself he jumped at it. And here we are, the very men who originally invited Hector to come and be crucified in Paris, supporting him against one of our own tribe. Who could have foreseen that? Life is really too absurd."

So talking they proceeded slowly on their way, heartily disliking their mission, but determined to do all they could for their friend. It would be a meeting which under the protection of an absurd social code would give Arnaud an opportunity of killing, or maiming, a rival whom he hated. But there had to be a duel. Hector had technically provoked Arnaud, and Arnaud was within his rights in demanding a meeting in the name of "honour." All that Hector's seconds could now do was to limit as much as possible the severity of the conditions.

Gloomily the two seconds, entrusted with this delicate and onerous mission, crossed the Place de la Concorde and walked up the Rue Royale. There in a private room of a well-known café restaurant they met the two seconds acting for Arnaud, and over an excellent luncheon discussed the terms of the coming encounter.

Hector's supporters were quite well acquainted with Arnaud's seconds. One was Armand de Laval, a well-known man about town, who had himself figured in several duels, in each case a lady having been the cause of the quarrel. De Laval was of the predatory kind of male, who shirked no risk in pursuit of his pleasures.

His companion was one* Georges Legay, a writer of some repute.

De Bac and Dufayel immediately found that any idea of avoiding a duel was quite out of the question. Arnaud, they were given to understand, in polite and formal terms, felt himself very deeply aggrieved, and had given his seconds *carte blanche* in the matter of conditions. They could not be too severe to meet his sense of wounded pride and dignity. There was the point that the man he was to fight was not of his own social standing, but he had waived that in view of the fact that M. Duval now belonged to the fraternity of letters, which enabled Arnaud to meet him on the field of honour without too much danger of being ridiculed. Any weapons, any conditions, however severe, would meet with his approval.

The conversation had been cordial at the start, but de Bac and Dufayel stiffened as they heard de Laval's uncompromising exposition of the case of his principal.

They knew that he knew what lay behind it all, that Hector would not be Arnaud's opponent so much as his victim, but there was nothing in what de Laval said to show that he attached the slightest importance to this fact, or thought that Arnaud was in any way taking an unfair advantage of the situation.

More and more the conference became formal and precise in tone. But de Bac and Dufayel were firm in their turn. They insisted that pistols should be the weapons, and that the conditions of the encounter should be limited to a single exchange of shots at thirty paces. Then after arranging the time and place of the meeting the two parties separated with bows and formal handshakes.

"Ah, well, we've done the best we can," said de Bac as they walked away. "We've cut his claws as much as possible. But what a dirty life, *mon petit*. Here to-morrow we may see this excellent Hector sacrificed to

that miserable little animal who thinks he can write plays and is so jealous of our friend that he wants to kill him. If only his pistol practice were as bad as his dialogue I should have no fear of the result. None whatever."

"Courage, old friend," said Dufayel, more cheerfully, taking his arm. "As you say, we have done the best we can. And I refuse to believe that fortune will go entirely against our friend to-morrow morning. He was not born to end like this."

And so, each one making up for the other's deficiencies, as they had done in their work for years past, they continued on their way, the perfect example of successful collaboration.

II

Of the little circle of people who shared the secret of the coming duel none was so disturbed as Marcelle.

From the moment when Hector had seized Arnaud at Senhur de Roza's reception, and unburdened himself of the scorn and anger he felt, she had been in a state of terror and desperation. She felt instinctively at once that here was no ordinary affair likely to end bloodlessly—but with honour and everybody satisfied—as happened so often with duels in Paris. There was no mistaking the atmosphere of anger and hate that enveloped the two men as they glared into each other's faces. Here was a situation that might easily end tragically.

She also knew that Hector could be no match for the man who had so provoked him, and whom he had in turn provoked. From her work at Roget's she knew Arnaud's type well. He was not of the authentic type of man of family—that too she knew. But many of the men of the circles in which he moved still regarded it as a necessary part of their social equipment to be skilled

in the use of arms. Her startled mind had immediately thought of flashing sword blades, and she saw a picture of Hector lying on the grass, his white shirt reddened by his welling life-blood, just as she had seen it in a melodrama at the Chatelet Theatre, years and years ago.

She had passed a night of tears and fear. This man she loved was so grave and unapproachable. He was unlike any other men she had ever met—unlike any other man in the world. And he was going to be killed by one whom she felt passionately was utterly beneath him.

"Ah, these dirty bourgeois!" she cried out bitterly to her pillow. She felt that Hector, socially, despite his native distinction, was near to her. And now, for Arnaud, all the smouldering hatred of the class which ministers to the wants and luxuries of those whom fortune has placed above them, flared out into white heat. She hated Arnaud for his wealth, for his clothes, for the ease and luxury of his life. He had a clean-shaven face, and wore a monocle. She loathed him for both these things. And because he was what he was, because he led an elegant and idle life; because he had never had to work for his living, and obsequiously say: "Yes, sir," to an employer—because of these things he was athletic, and *bien entraîné* and a skilful fencer, and would be able to kill her beloved as easily as she could kill a fly.

She crushed her face into her pillow as this enraging train of thought mingled with her grief. . . . Ah, if *she* could only have got at Arnaud at that moment!

She had thought during the night of going to the newspapers with her secret. Perhaps if they published it in time the police would step in and prevent the duel. but with morning she put the idea away. The lesson of the interview in the *Moniteur* had been enough. Was it not, indeed, from that very indiscretion that the duel had sprung? No, she could not intervene in that way. But something had to be done.

III

Down in the *salons* at Roget's next morning her white face attracted the attention of the other employees, but in response to sympathetic inquiries she merely said that she had been a little indisposed during the night, and had not slept well.

Mechanically, a pale-faced automaton, she went about her work all day . . . thinking, thinking. And then, at some time in the afternoon, a ray of hope suddenly illuminated her. Why had she not thought of it before? Lina Bernay! If she were told perhaps she could stop it. She could bring pressure on Arnaud if anybody could.

At the earliest moment possible she escaped from Roget's—not forgetting to look critically at herself before departing.

She took a *fiacre* to Lina's flat in the Avenue Friedland. The manservant who opened the door seemed the personification of hauteur. Madame was not in, and he could not say when she would be. She might return before going to the theatre, or she might go there direct. It was impossible to say.

Marcelle, though she longed to smack his smug complacent face, was intimidated by his armour-plated calm. There was nothing to do but go to the theatre later on and stay there until Lina arrived.

Cheated of her immediate purpose she wondered what to do. Why not go to see Hector, to hear what had happened? Perhaps after all it had fallen through. Perhaps de Bac and Dufayel had managed to arrange it. Yes, there was some hope in that. She walked rapidly down the Avenue until she met a *fiacre* tinkling towards her and, jumping in, ordered the *cocher* to drive quickly to Hector's address.

Arrived there she hurried breathlessly up the five flight of stairs and pressed the bell. But though she rang again and again, her heart beating furiously, there was no reply.

Marcelle descended the stairs slowly, and a sudden overwhelming rush of depression took the place of her newly born hopes. She felt very lonely and helpless, and afraid.

IV . *

Lina was late in reaching the theatre that evening. At the pressing invitation of Senhor de Roza she had paid a second visit to Chantilly to see the victor of the Grand Prix. She herself had won a considerable sum of money on the victory of La Blonde, and although she had no great desire to accompany the Brazilian on his sentimental journey yet she had felt that, in the circumstances, it would have been ungracious to refuse. And moreover, once the trip had been proposed she felt a thrill of interest at the idea of visiting once more the beautiful animal which she had seen, in that moment of delirious excitement the day before, and to the thunder of acclaiming thousands, flash first past the winning post.

On the way back, as they rolled along in his comfortable and roomy limousine, the millionaire had seized the occasion to make a formal proposal. With real sincerity and in admirably chosen language Senhor de Roza had offered her all he possessed—his hand, his fortune, his coffee plantations and railways, his cattle farms, in short everything.

The offer came quite unexpectedly, in the midst of a general conversation. The transition on the millionaire's part had been very skilfully done. Lina, caught at a disadvantage, found herself more troubled and embarrassed than she would have believed possible. He was so

obviously sincere. The offer was one which most women would have regarded as immensely flattering.

"Truly, my friend, I do not know what to say," was all she could at first find in reply.

Senhor de Roza judged it wise not to press his advantage too impetuously.

"It goes without saying," he went on, "that should you decide to make me the happiest of men I should renounce Brazil and live over here. We would, if you wished it, make a voyage to South America. Ah, there are many things out there which would interest you. But only just sufficient time to arrange my affairs. And then, whatever you wished, just whatever you wished. Your career—that you could continue, if you so desired. I should be happy to be the husband of one so famous. Or we could travel. Anything. Life, my dear Lina, would be yours to do as you wished. I offer you love, respect, admiration, and anything that riches can buy . . . But that is a point I will not press."

There was silence for a time—a silence during which many hundreds of tall and waving poplars flashed past them as they rolled swiftly along the straight *route nationale*.

"Well?" he ventured, after what seemed to him a very long time.

"It is difficult, my friend. I am very sensible of the honour you pay me. But you must give me a little time to reflect." She uttered the conventional, banal phrases hurriedly, glad of the refuge they offered her.

"But how long, Lina?" He was insistent, but very gentle. "This is not a caprice on my part. I have long been thinking of this—I have been thinking of nothing else but you for months past. And when La Blonde won yesterday do you know what I said to myself? I said: 'My lucky star is in the ascendant. I will ask her at the first opportunity I get!' That was all that I thought

of when all those thousands of people were shouting at Longchamps. That was the only idea in my mind when I led in the winner, and congratulations were showered upon me. . . . 'That pleases you?' He touched her arm lightly with his hand as he spoke.

"Yes, that pleases me. It is very charming." Lina was a little moved in spite of herself. Many things had flashed through her mind since Senhor de Roza had broached the subject. It had occurred to her that he was very dark, very swarthy. He had never appealed to her in the slightest degree . . . And yet nothing could exceed the delicacy of his wooing.

"Then, how long? I have already waited long. Nothing else matters to me. When can I have your answer, Lina?"

She was cornered, and knew it.

"Give me a week, just a week," she answered, a little desperately. "I will tell you then."

"Excellent. A week from now I will come to you."

"In a week . . . And now we will talk of other things. Shall we?" Her laugh was just a little nervous.

And here the Brazilian scored again by the ease with which he turned the conversation to other topics, and swiftly dissipated the atmosphere of embarrassment caused by his proposal. It was no small feat, there in the intimacy of the luxurious limousine, to switch the conversation back to everyday topics without any suggestion of effort or difficulty. As he talked gaily again, and led her on to do the same, Lina found herself admiring the ease of it. She was generally accustomed to dominate whatever company she found herself in. But here was this dark millionaire managing the situation just as he wished, doing exactly as he liked with it. She began to reflect that there were probably forces and powers in him which she had never suspected. He was not, then, merely

a man with a great deal of money as she had always regarded him.

They parted gaily at the big street door to her flat, and he said no more about what he would expect to hear from her in a week's time. Lina found herself wondering what she would say then. In those few short moments in his limousine Senhor de Roza had made more progress than he had done in all the past six months.

She dined hurriedly at home. It was reported to her that a young person had called, apparently desiring to see her urgently, but she paid no particular attention to the matter. Within less than an hour after leaving the Brazilian her automobile drew up outside the Etoile.

As she turned to enter the stage door she found herself face to face with Marcelle, who was waiting by the concierge's window. The actress held out her hand, with a cordial greeting.

"Good evening, Madame," said Marcelle. "I have been waiting to see you at the earliest possible moment."

"You look pale," said Lina. "Is anything the matter?"

"I have something I must tell you at once. It concerns Monsieur Duval."

"Come up to my room. We will talk there," said Lina, and together they walked up the grimy artistes' staircase of the Etoile, and so through the bustle and litter of a stage being got in readiness for the rise of the curtain, to the comfortable and cosy room of the leading lady. There Marie, at a sign from her mistress, left them alone.

"And now," said Lina, taking the other by the arm, "is it anything grave? Is there anything the matter with Monsieur Duval?"

"He is going to fight a duel with Monsieur Arnaud to-morrow morning," blurted out Marcelle. "I have come to you to see if there is any chance of stopping it. You alone can do it."

"A duel!"

Lina was at first very shocked at the news. She, too, had an immediate vision of Hector lying wounded or killed, and the extent to which that vision affected her caused her amazement. She had not realized that she felt so deeply on Hector's account as this. It was absurd. And deliberately she tried to minimize her apprehension. Swiftly there came to her aid her knowledge of this sort of thing. She knew so many men who had fought duels, even several of them, and were none the worse for it.

"It is unfortunate," she went on. "I do not like to think of these two friends of mine quarrelling openly. I am sorry to hear it. But you look so very alarmed. Is there reason, then, to be so very apprehensive? These foolish men often . . ."

"I know, I know," broke in Marcelle. "But this is not an ordinary duel . . . a duel to *épater* the Press or the public. This is serious. Very serious. Arnaud is determined to kill him. This is an excellent occasion for him to remove a man he hates, and he is determined to do it. If Hector goes out to-morrow morning he will be killed."

Lina herself turned pale at this. The alarm and emotion of Marcelle were infectious. The two women stared into each other's eyes for a long moment.

"How do you know this? What makes you so sure that it will be so dangerous for Hector?"

"Heavens, was I not there when the quarrel happened? Did I not see the look in the eyes of both men? Ah, but don't I know why all this has come about? And Hector himself last night—was it not evident that he himself will expect the worst to-morrow morning?" Her hands clasped, and tears starting to her eyes, Marcelle declaimed this series of interrogations almost in a breath. Now that she could at last speak to somebody on the affair that was weighing down her heart, now that she was in the

presence of the wonderful Lina herself, her pent-up emotion burst out in a torrent.

"But calm yourself, you must calm yourself," said Lina, putting an arm sympathetically round Marcelle. "The quarrel was last night then? Where was it, and what was it about? Why should they fight?"

"Ah, why should they fight!" exclaimed Marcelle dramatically, forgetting her tears for a moment. "There is reason enough, God knows! That man has pursued Hector—oh, but he is a monster. If I had him here now"—she bent her fingers into the form of what were intended to be formidable talons—"I would kill him myself, I, Marcelle, with these hands that you see. Ah, but what a man! What a dirty type, I tell you! He has pursued Hector implacably. He is jealous of him, because of his play, because of . . . Ah, no, but I mustn't say that to you . . ."

"Because of what else? Tell me, Marcelle, I insist on knowing everything."

"Because . . . because Madame has been kind to him, and has shown so much interest in him. And now he has forced a challenge out of him, and to-morrow morning he will kill him."

And Marcelle's tears streamed forth this time. Hastily producing a handkerchief she sobbed unrestrainedly.

"Come, come, Marcelle," said Lina pleadingly. "You must not do this. I shall not know what to do if you do not tell me clearly. Come, my dear. Tell me everything so that I shall understand."

Lina's voice had taken on its most coaxing accents, and Marcelle's emotion soon succumbed to the spell. She mastered herself with an effort, and patted her eyes with her handkerchief.

"It was at Monsieur de Roza's great reception last night," she began, her voice still broken by sobs. "Ah, why did we ever go there! I felt all the time . . . But

anyhow, I had told Hector about the *Clairon*, and you should have seen his eyes, they blazed, and then a few moments afterwards he met Monsieur Arnaud face to face, and seized him by the hand like this . . . Ah, but for you to understand it properly I shall have to begin at the beginning and tell you all about that interview in the *Moniteur*, and everything."

Lina made an exclamation of impatience.

"For the love of God, Marcelle, do, but be quick. Already I am very late. Tell me everything, but do it immediately, or I shall not be able to listen now and you will have to wait a long time. Now calm yourself and tell me."

Under the compelling personality of the actress Marcelle was at last able to tell a coherent story, beginning with her meeting with Hector and his unhappiness in those days; leading up to Arnaud's participation in the publication of the lying interview; the unwelcome news for Hector—which he learned through Arnaud's agency and with herself again as the innocent accomplice—of the circumstances under which he had been given his position on the *Clairon*. And finally, his cutting words to Arnaud at the reception and the blow with the glove and the challenge.

It all came as a flood of light to Lina. It explained many things—Hector's exact relations with Marcelle among others. She felt a rush of delight at the thought, which was again a surprise for her. In the ordinary man it would not have mattered what Marcelle was to him. But Hector she had always felt was different—and here was the proof. She had not been mistaken. And then his attitude on that night in this very room when Arnaud had produced the odious interview. How calmly disdainful he had been, and what he must have thought of her own coldness at a moment when he needed her friendship.

"Ah, the animal!" she exclaimed, her thoughts

suddenly dwelling on Arnaud. • “He shall not do as he wishes. To think that all this has been happening and that I knew nothing. It must seem to Hector that everything is deceit and falseness.”

“I knew you would help,” exclaimed Marcelle fervently, clasping her hands and looking at the transformed face of the actress. Lina’s eyes were blazing with anger and indignation.

There came a knock at the door and Marie entered.

“Madame is already a quarter of an hour late,” she announced firmly.

“I know, I know. Prepare me quickly. And as soon as I have gone on, Marie, telephone to Monsicur Arnaud, and tell him I must see him to-night, no matter at what time. If he is not at his apartment try and find out where he is. I must see him. It is very important.”

“Very good, Madame,” said Marie calmly, and busied herself with the preparations for her mistress’s first entry.

“And I wish to see nobody else to-night, Marie. See that Mademoiselle Marcelle has anything she wants. She will wait here for me.”

“Very good, Madame,” was Marie’s reply. It would have been the same whatever Lina had commanded. There was very little in the life of Paris that could surprise Marie.

V.

Lina’s thoughts were far from the stage that night as she played the part of the designing *ingénue* of the provinces. Her thoughts were with Hector, and this sudden new turn in his surprising fortunes in Paris. Marcelle had reproduced most dramatically the scene at the reception when Hector had blazed down on Arnaud—like a big dog shaking a rat, as she had described it.

Lina applauded within herself what Hector had done. But more and more she agreed with Marcelle's view that this was a duel in which Hector would merely be sacrificed, and apprehension and agitation gained upon her as the night progressed.

The house at any rate had seen no difference in her, and after the first act she hurried as soon as the applause would allow her back to her dressing-room to hear if there was any news of Arnaud. Marie met her with the reply that he could not be found on the telephone. She had drawn blank at his flat and the two clubs which he most frequented, and did not know where to try next.

"No doubt he is at Montmartre or somewhere. He will be rejoicing before the event," said Marcelle viciously. "They do that when they have duels."

"You must keep on telephoning," Lina commanded Marie. "Perhaps he will come in at any time, at one of these places."

During the progress of the second act she became aware that Senhor de Roza, faithful to her and the play, had entered his box, and it occurred to her at once that he might be able to help. He usually had a very good idea of Arnaud's movements. More than that, she felt she would like to consult him in this difficult situation.

Returned to her room she sent Marie round to his box to say she would like to see him. He appeared immediately, delighted. He greeted Marcelle cordially and inquired how she had enjoyed herself the night before.

"Not at all," returned Marcelle bluntly, "I was very unhappy there."

"A thousand regrets," murmured the millionaire, at this rather surprising announcement. His eyebrows went up a little, and he turned to Lina as if seeking an explanation.

"No fault of yours," she said with a quick smile. "But that is really why I asked you to come. Something

rather serious has happened and I wished to consult you on it."

"I need not tell you how glad I shall be to be able to help you in any way," he returned gravely.

As rapidly as possible Lina put him in touch with the situation, and her view of its gravity. The millionaire looked thoughtful as she proceeded.

"Therefore Arnaud must be found," she concluded. "I must see him before this affair takes place. This infamy must not be allowed to happen."

"It is unfortunate, very, very unfortunate," the millionaire breathed. "I knew nothing of this. I am sorry this happened in my house. I wish your excellent Hector well in every way. But, pardon. If the duel is already arranged what can be done? It will be impossible to stop it, short of informing the police, and that—one could not do that. And Hector was the aggressor." Senhor de Roza was walking very warily. He did not like this surprising situation so unexpectedly thrust upon him. And Lina, he could see, was in a difficult mood.

"The aggressor," she scoffed. "The aggressor! When ever since this man came to Paris, with his dreams and his hopes, Arnaud has constantly been endeavouring to wound and hurt him! That interview! Could anything be more base! And this affair of the *Cluiron*. You intended to be kind. I thank you for that. But Arnaud contrives to let him know the truth about it in a way which was bound to humiliate him. It was your intention, I know, that he should never know how that was arranged. But see what Arnaud does with the situation! Who is the aggressor, I ask you? And shall Arnaud now be allowed to kill this man—this man who has already suffered so much from cruel jesting and malevolence? Shall Arnaud be allowed to shoot him or run him through at his pleasure—to murder him under the

cloak of a duel? That is all it would be if he were killed—murder! Shall we allow the assassin calmly to go forward with his plan? Answer me that? ”

Lina was magnificent in her scorn, and the Brazilian was equally delighted and dismayed. He revelled in her as she stood over him, taller by an inch or so, and wonderful in her anger. But he recoiled from the problem thrust upon him. It was a singularly difficult one, and he saw little chance in it of pleasing the woman he so ardently desired. This was the last sort of thing he had expected when he received the welcome message to come and see her.

“ You are right, absolutely right. It is infamous,” he parried. Senhor de Roza was big enough, even now, to feel in no way jealous of Hector. He still saw in all this only a warm-hearted defence of her *protégé* by Lina. “ But what, my dear Lina,” he went on, “ are you proposing should be done? If we see Arnaud shall you tell him there must be no duel? Because that . . . ” he spread out his hands a little helplessly. “ That, I must be frank with you, will be difficult, impossible. And if I know anything of your *protégé*—he would not agree either.”

Lina’s eyes flashed. She was not in a mood to accept contrary arguments, however reasonable.

“ You must find Arnaud—then we will see,” she declared imperiously. “ At any rate this duel must not take place until I have talked with him. You know his movements. It is imperative that I should see him to-night.”

“ I am in no way a confidant of Arnaud’s as to how he employs his time,” returned the millionaire, with just the slightest hint of irony. “ At the present moment he may be anywhere or nowhere in Paris. But if it is possible to find him to-night it shall be done, *chère amie*. I will start off on my mission at once. • Before it is time for you to

leave here I will let you know if I have had any success."

And bending low over her hand, which he kissed with a touching reverence, the millionaire turned and was gone; Midas gratefully obedient to the commands of Venus and counting her smile as great reward.

CHAPTER XXIV

I

HECTOR had only just left his flat a few minutes before Marcelle called there in her vain attempt to see him. He had spent the day in clearing up his affairs, and in the difficult task of composing letters to his various friends. He had shrunk from doing them. It seemed like sealing his own fate to write letters which were only to be sent off in the event of his own death. But he had judged it his duty to do so, and had written to Lina, to Dr. Lemoine and to Marcelle. He wrote a fourth letter to M. Trouchet, resigning his position on the *Clairon*. This he posted.

This done he had gone out in search of a lawyer's office, and found one in the Rue de l'Université. There he had made his will, leaving the rights of his plays to Lina, making Marcelle joint owner, with Paillasse, of his barber's shop in St. Médard, and leaving to Dr. Lemoine his collection of books there. To Marcelle also he left the contents of his flat in Paris. It was a strange testament, but having done it Hector felt more at peace with himself. He felt that it was a just division of all he owned.

Then he returned to his flat, dressed, and, arrayed as if for a fête, went off to meet de Bac and Dufayel at the Café de la Paix, as had been arranged between them.

They were to dine with him, and acquaint him with the arrangements they had made for the morrow.

The meeting between the three was cordial, almost jovial, with no hint of what lay behind it. De Bac and Dufayel were careful to refrain from showing in any way that their mission weighed upon their spirits. Hector on his part tried to pretend that life was pursuing its normal course. And yet in the minds of all three was the apprehension, amounting almost to certainty, that this meeting was but the prelude to tragedy.

Over dinner the talk was of anything but the purpose for which they had met. It was not until the end of it that de Bac outlined the result of their meeting with Arnaud's seconds. His manner of imparting the information was sober, without being grave. Pistols had been chosen. There was to be one shot each, he explained, at thirty paces. The conditions were as little rigorous as possible.

"You left it to us," he said quietly, through the curling smoke of his cigar. "We could of course have made the conditions severer. But I imagine you will agree that it goes as far as is necessary."

"It will do," said Hector with a grim smile.

"Everything else is arranged," continued de Bac. He gave the details. The meeting was for nine o'clock at the Parc des Princes. Severin-Blanchard, the famous arbitrator, who officiated at most duels in or near Paris, would preside over the encounter. There was nothing more to be done.

"It is very good of you both," exclaimed Hector impulsively. "I will not pretend to you that I am looking forward with any joy to to-morrow's encounter. But it is a great comfort to me that I have found two such good friends at this moment. It will make a great difference to me when the time arrives to-morrow."

They made light of the matter, impressed and moved all the same by his earnestness and gratitude.

"And now as to this evening," said Dufayel. "There are two things we might do. You know nothing of pistol shooting. I know a place not far from here where you could have some practice. De Bac is very skilful. No doubt even in an hour he could teach you enough to be very useful to-morrow. . . . Or we could go to a theatre or music-hall or cabaret, wherever you wish, and amuse ourselves. What do you say?"

Hector pondered a moment, but was not long in making up his mind.

"One shot," he laughed. "It hardly seems worth while to practise for that. I have a feeling it will be best to leave my lack of skill where it is. No, I think it will be best to go out and amuse ourselves."

De Bac nodded in agreement.

"It is just as well," he said. "It is no good taking these things too seriously. And I always believe in the luck of the novice. What is more I can tell you, as we sit here, what will be the best thing to do.

"There are two ways of hitting a target with a duelling pistol. One is to take a careful sight, with eye down the barrel, to dwell on the aim, and to put the bullet exactly where you want to put it—that is if your nerves are calm enough. But this is a method for the expert, and a very cool expert at that. Time is very short on these occasions.

"The other method is the one for you. It is to shoot more or less by instinct, by the feel of the matter, as it were, and not by sight. Remember that a duelling pistol throws high. You bring it up not much farther than the centre of your body and without taking a sight down the weapon you *feel* your way to your target, feel that the barrel is in line with your man, and then fire. With such a method you cannot say that you will hit a target in any particular spot, or anywhere near it, but you can

have some hope of hitting it, somewhere. Look, I will illustrate."

Pushing his coffee cup aside de Bac took out a pencil and by means of diagrams drawn on the tablecloth, roughly representing two duellists facing each other, expounded his theory. Hector listened and observed very attentively. It occurred to him that it was the strangest after-dinner conversation he had ever taken part in.

"De Bac is right," said Dufayel. "He knows his subject."

"I shall remember, to-morrow," Hector said simply.

De Bac scribbled over his diagrams, they having served their turn.

"I am sure you will," he said. "What is more, I feel that good luck will be with you. Both Dufayel and I feel that. We were saying so just before you came. Is it not so, *mon ami*?"

"That very thing," returned Dufayel stoutly.

Hector smiled.

"That is a great omen for good," he said. "When de Bac and Dufayel are agreed upon a thing all Paris knows that it is so."

II

It was not until after midnight, and the curtain had fallen nearly an hour before, that Senhor de Roza presented himself again at the theatre.

"At last!" exclaimed Lina, betraying some impatience. "You have found him?"

"Alas, no. So far I have been unable to. I have called myself at half a dozen places where it was possible he might be, but with no success. For the past hour or so I have had two secretaries scouring Paris. I told them to communicate with you here in case they found him."

Lina frowned, forgetting to thank her dutiful slave.

"If we hear nothing in the next half-hour," she announced, "we will go to his apartment and wait for him to come in. If he is to fight a duel in the morning, even one which means so little to him, I *présume* he is not likely to come in very late. He will have to get up early."

"In that way," agreed the millionaire, "we ought to be fairly sure of finding him." But in his own mind he was not quite so certain. There was no saying where Arnaud might pass the night.

There was a sense of constraint in the room. Lina sat back in a low, comfortable chair, a little frown on her face. Marcelle had not spoken, and she looked pale and troubled. Senhor de Roza understood quite well her agitation. She was apprehensive for the fate of her lover. And Lina . . . ?

For the first time he wondered whether there might be any truth in Arnaud's idea that Lina had a sentimental interest in Hector. Up to this moment he had regarded the suggestion as a mere absurdity. But might there be something in it after all? For several years now this beautiful woman had behaved in what all her world was agreed to regard as an extraordinary manner. Ever since the death of her too-temperamental husband she had kept all mankind at bay. That was an absurdity. Might she not then be capable of something else just as bizarre, and have found in this strange and compelling individual the man for whom she had been waiting? It was a disturbing thought. From that moment the millionaire found a new and unwelcome interest in the situation.

There was some desultory conversation, with Lina every few moments glancing at a clock that stood on her dressing-table. She was dressed to go out, and Senhor de Roza sighed inwardly as he looked at the ravishing lines of her figure. More than ever she seemed

the most desirable woman in the world. Something like jealousy of Hector at last began to work within him.

The telephone bell suddenly rang out. He marked the change of expression that came over Lina's face at the sound.

"That will be for you," she said eagerly.

He took the receiver, listened, gave a few monosyllabic replies, and turned again to Lina.

"There is news of him. Only five minutes ago he left Maxim's. My secretary thinks it quite possible he has gone home, but he cannot be sure. He was with three or four others."

"Then we will go there too," said Lina decidedly, and rose abruptly from her chair. "Come, my little one." She addressed Marcelle. "Let us go and see what can be done."

Down below her own automobile was waiting, but the Brazilian begged that they should all get into his roomier one. He wished, he said, to be allowed to be in attendance until this affair had been seen through to its end.

"It is very kind of you," said Lina, suddenly awakening to the fact that he had been the slave of her imperious commands for some hours past, and proposed to continue being so.

"Not at all, dear Lina," he replied. "You know that to be of service to you gratifies me a thousand times more than it can possibly please you."

She roused herself still more to bestow on him the smile that such a speech demanded. But she was glad that Marcelle was with them, sitting opposite, her pale face averted, as they rolled swiftly along in search of Arnaud. With her mind so seriously occupied with one man it was a relief that this other could not pay her attentions too openly.

She hardly knew what to think of herself in all this. People would say that she was mad to be so concerned

with her barber. Perhaps she was. That couldn't be helped. The madness was gaining on her, and she welcomed it. She comforted herself with the thought that she knew something about him that nobody else knew, not even Hector himself. If only she could save him from the danger that threatened him, and in which now she believed utterly!

III

Arnaud lived on the inner courtyard of a big and luxurious block of apartments within a few minutes of the Arc de Triomphe. The outer door clanged heavily behind them as they walked in. At Arnaud's door a valet appeared in response to their ring. He announced that his master was not at home, and that he did not know when he would return.

"We will wait," said Lina imperiously, and they were shown into an imposing *salon* which did credit to its owner's taste. The valet departed and came back in a few moments with a tray loaded with liqueurs and cigarettes.

Twenty minutes passed, which seemed an eternity.

Lina sat motionless, hardly speaking. Marcelle had not uttered a word. It occurred to the Brazilian that it was very like waiting at the dentist's. He liked the adventure less and less and was convinced in advance that Lina's intervention could do no good. But her wishes were law.

At last they heard a ring. There was a faint murmur of voices outside, then the door of their room opened and Arnaud appeared, in evening dress, his usually pale face a little flushed.

"But this is a surprise, a wonderful surprise," he exclaimed, coming forward and bowing over Lina's hand. He greeted the others and turned again to Lina. "My

man said he thought it was you. I could hardly believe it."

"It is as you see," she returned quietly.

"But what good fortune brings you here so unexpectedly? One does not expect such things in this prosaic life." He made a great effort to appear natural and thoroughly at ease. He took out his monocle, polished it vigorously and replaced it.

"I came to see you on a matter of importance, and asked Senhor de Roza to accompany me. But as it is an affair between us two, and one in which Senhor de Roza cannot very well concern himself, I think it would be better if we talked alone. I think it would be best. Would you mind?" She turned to the Brazilian.

Senhor de Roza stood up.

"It is as you wish. I am entirely at your disposal, and will stay or go, just as you desire."

"I think it will be better as I say." She smiled dazzlingly on him, seeming to wake to full life again.

Senhor de Roza bowed his submission. Arnaud took him and Marcelle out to another room, and in a moment was back, facing Lina alone.

"This intrigues me," he said with an attempt at jauntiness. "What is this serious business?"

"To-morrow you are to fight Hector Duval," she announced bluntly.

"It is true, but I thought it was a secret. Has he told you all about it?"

Her eyes hardened.

"I heard of this to-night, and from the same source I heard many other things. To-morrow—this morning—you intend to try to kill him."

He shrugged his shoulders.

"I would not say that. It is a duel. One never knows what may happen in a duel. He presumably will try to kill me. The chances are equal."

"That is untrue," she said, containing herself with difficulty. "He knows nothing of swords or duelling pistols. How should he? Which is it to be?"

"Pistols."

"But you are practised in these things. I know it. To talk of equal chances is absurd. Listen, Gustave. You and I have been friends for a long time—we have been good friends. If there is no chance of stopping it altogether—if it has gone too far for that—I ask you to see that this duel ends harmlessly, as hundreds of others have done. You must not think of doing anything terrible."

"You ask too much, Lina. He will shoot at me."

"There will be little enough of danger to you in that. And anyhow, it could be arranged. A word would be sufficient. These things have surely been done before."

"Ah, pardon." He bowed ironically. "There is a limit to the ridiculous. I have gone far in consenting to meet one who is not of our world. I could not go out to defend my honour under such conditions as those you now suggest. You must admit that it is sufficiently difficult to meet one who was until recently a barber."

She nearly exploded at his attitude but managed to contain herself.

"But, dear friend, I implore you. Think of what he has suffered already. It would be infamous if anything worse happened to him. You would never forgive yourself."

She had stepped towards him, her hands outstretched. She, who had always treated his advances with the most careless disdain, was imploring him! Now was the time if ever to be strong, Arnaud told himself.

"You seem to take an extreme interest in this man," he said abruptly.

"And why should I not? Was I not one of those who helped in his abasement? You yourself regretted what

happened. Surely you must admit that he deserved *my* help."

"It was at my expense," he said harshly, feeling that the situation was utterly in his hands. She did not reply, but gave a humble little gesture, as though asking pardon. He rushed on. "Lina, absurd though it seems, I have thought that you loved this man, and the thought maddens me. Are you mad enough to love him? Answer me that." He seized her wrist with a masterful gesture.

She flushed, and plucked her hand away.

"You have no right to ask me such a question. Because I helped one who was treated shamefully by us all, must my motives be questioned? Isn't humanity explanation enough? Am I one who has ever given her affections easily?"

"All that is no answer. It is an evasion." He approached her, gazing hungrily into her face. "It is ridiculous, I know, but I have felt for long that you have an affection for this absurd man. But you shall show now whether you have or not. Listen, Lina. For long you have treated *me* lightly. You have been like ice to me. But you know that I love you, that I want you more than any other woman that ever was. I want you, I tell you. I love you—honourably. Promise to be mine—it is marriage of which I speak—and I promise you that no harm shall come to this man. He has provoked me, insulted me, but I will let that pass. Lina . . ."

He stretched out his arms suddenly to seize her bodily, but she jumped back. She stared at him fascinated. Her impulse was to smack the face that had been thrusting itself into hers. But this was a development she had never dreamed of, and she realized swiftly that it only intensified the dilemma. For the second time that day her judgment of masculine character had been at fault. This man was not merely the fop she had thought him to be. He had the power to be dangerous, and was prepared to

use it unless she gave way to his cynical suggestion. She had, perhaps, even made Hector's case more desperate.

"You ask me for such a promise, under such conditions!" she murmured.

And then an unexpected interruption happened. The door opened and Fifi D'Artois appeared. Arnaud uttered an exclamation of anger, and stepped towards the intruder.

Fifi tripped into the room. She was in an evening-gown that permitted her to be semi-nude. Her hair, vividly and artificially golden, was fluffed extravagantly above her baby face.

She greeted Lina with an air that was almost impudence, and then turned to Arnaud petulantly.

"My little one, I could not wait alone any longer. I was getting bored."

"You should not have come in, Fifi," said Arnaud sharply. "We are discussing a very important matter." His back was to Lina, and he glared at the intruder. "You must leave us for a little longer."

"And why should I?" shrilled Fifi defiantly, the accent of the *Montmartroise* coming out. All her latent instincts of the *faubourg* rose in revolt at the idea of being ordered out of the room in the presence of this other woman, this vastly superior woman, whose influence over her lover she knew of and resented. "Have I not waited long enough while you talk to her?" She glared at him in return.

Lina stepped quickly forward. Her eyes were blazing. She ignored Fifi's presence and concentrated the fury of her glance on Arnaud. He tried to present a serene countenance, but his confidence of a moment ago was gone.

"You dared to propose such a bargain to me," she cried, "with your *petite amie* here, waiting impatiently for you in the next room! You dared! A few moments ago you spoke of your honour. You are the last one who should use such a word. I learned to-night how you have been persecuting this man—I learned that it was you who

arranged that despicable interview in the *Moniteur*. And you have the effrontery to speak to me of his having provoked you, when from first to last you have behaved towards him with the grossest bad faith—you, who are rich and fortunate, while he was poor and friendless. You who pose as the pattern of the man of the world! And since you attach so much importance to such things, let me tell you that Hector is an aristocrat not only by nature but by birth—by birth, do you understand! You speak of ‘our world.’ What is it? He really has blood in him—if that matters. His father is not a manufacturer but is the bearer of one of the oldest names in France—a distinction which he has throughout his life dishonoured. So much for birth and breeding. Does that interest you, my man of the world?”

He glared at her, almost insanely furious.

“You have said far too much,” he hissed, on an expiring breath, and there was a threat in his words.

She returned his glare.

“You have asked for it,” she cried, “over and over again. What you are proposing to do this morning is contemptible and villainous. But all the advantage does not lie with you, as you seem to think. I tell you this, if anything serious happens to Hector Duval to-day I will make your name repellent in all Paris. If you dare to shoot this man in the name of honour I will make your name a symbol of dishonour. I will devote all my strength to it, and I am much more powerful than you. There is nothing men will not do for me. There is not a decent person you know who will not despise you, and show it. It will be the end of you in Paris.”

• She was queenly in her wrath, carried away by the sudden overboiling of her long-suppressed anger. Arnaud quivered under the merciless lash of her words. From a man with a grievance she had transformed him into something like a devil. He could not bear what she had said

to him. It flayed all his tenderest susceptibilities and vanities. It left him only with the desire to hurt and kill. His face was livid and ugly as he tried to stand against her torrent of reproach.

And then as Lina's tirade ended there came the ugliest possible climax to it—a shrill laugh of derision from Fifi which, marking the gulf that lay between the two women, was the final blow at Arnaud's self-esteem. He turned on her furiously.

"Silence, you little fool," he hissed. His baleful fury made him forget all the teachings of the code he affected. "You are not running about Montmartre now! Silence! Do you not see what you have done by coming in here!"

The door had been left open at Fifi's entry, and Senhor de Roza now appeared in the opening.

"If I am not intruding," he murmured suavely, as he stepped into the room. "I thought I heard voices raised." Nobody answered him and his quick eye took in the astonishing group before him, every face in which was marked by the most intense emotion. He judged it was high time to intervene—to exercise his right of temporary guardian to the woman who stood there looking like a queen of tragedy.

He turned to Lina.

"Do you wish me to do or say anything?" he inquired silkily. His gaze dwelt significantly for a moment on Arnaud. "I am entirely at your service."

"Thank you. There is only one thing I wish, and that is that you should kindly take me away from here."

And without glancing again either at Arnaud or Fifi she swept out of the room.

CHAPTER XXV



THE three of them having emerged from the vaulted exit to Arnaud's flat sat once more in de Roza's limousine, drawn up near the side of the Champs Élysées. The chauffeur tucked a rug round Lina and then stood outside waiting for orders. Lina sat staring ahead, her hands clasped, apparently oblivious of the others.

"And where shall we go now?" the millionaire gently inquired, after a silence.

She did not reply for a moment, and when she spoke it had nothing to do with his question.

"I have made it worse—much worse," she said hopelessly. "He will kill him now."

"It will not be so bad as that—by no means," said the millionaire. "Duels do not end in that manner nowadays."

"I fear this one will," she replied, and relapsed again into silence.

"I too fear it," said Marcelle huskily, her face working. It was the first time she had spoken since they left the theatre.

"No, no," protested the Brazilian. "You simply must not dream of such a thing, either of you. I refuse to think that your good friend Hector"—he addressed this deliberately to Marcelle—"will have such atrocious bad luck." He turned to Lina. • "You, too, my dear. You

must not think that the interesting career of your *protégé* ends here. He will survive this meeting with Arnaud—and will write other plays for you.”

She did not seem to hear this. Instead she said, surprisingly :

“Do you know the habits of the Marquis de Malvoisin-Montigny?”

He stared at her.

“The habits of the Marquis de Malvoisin-Montigny?” he repeated, as if he had not heard aright.

“Yes. Does he still keep late hours?”

“I believe he does,” replied de Roza, still very puzzled. “In fact I have often seen him playing at the Jockey Club up to two o’clock in the morning. I understand that he very rarely stays later than that.” He added dryly: “He has apparently reformed somewhat.”

“Two o’clock,” Lina repeated. “And the time now?”

“It is a few minutes short of that hour,” he replied, still wondering.

“Then will you drive me at once to his house? It is over in the Faubourg St. Germain, isn’t it?”

“Yes. I know it quite well, although I have never had the honour of being inside it. Certainly we will drive there at once, if you wish it. But is it not a little late to call?”

“That does not matter in the circumstances.”

“As you wish. But tell me, dear Lina, and forgive me if I seem in any way inquisitive—but I presume that your call on the Marquis has something to do with the affair of Hector.”

“Yes.”

“Then in what way, might I ask, can the Marquis possibly help in this matter? I do not see how he could possibly be of any assistance—although I am prepared to do anything that you think would aid you. But if you

could give me some idea as to what way the Marquis could be of service . . ."

He stopped, fearful of pressing her too far. Yet he felt he ought to know something of what this surprising proposal meant.

Lina was again silent for a few moments, while both de Roza and Marcelle studied her, waiting on her words.

"I propose to call on the Marquis," she said at last, "because I feel it is my duty to do so. He ought to know what is going to happen in a few hours. Perhaps I ought to explain. You see, the Marquis is Hector's father."

"You astonish me!" exclaimed de Roza, and began to think furiously. This was an amazing development, and not a happy one.

Marcelle stared transfixed at the announcement, and a sharp intake of breath showed what she felt about it. But she said nothing. She was too astounded, and too intimidated by the whole situation, to speak.

"In that case," the Brazilian went on, "there is nothing to do but to drive there, whatever the hour. If, of course, you really think he ought to be told."

"I do," said Lina.

De Roza opened the window, gave orders to the waiting chauffeur, and the car moved swiftly away.

II

The car, having passed through the Place de la Concorde and over the river turned into the long and narrow Rue de l'Université, turned again, and drew up a few moments later before a large and severe-looking mansion set back in a deep courtyard; the "hotel" of the Marquis de Malvoisin-Montigny.

Here in what remained of the aristocratic seclusion of

the Faubourg St. Germain the Marquis lived much as his immediate forbears had done before him. He had relatives in that quarter who had never accepted the existence of Republican France, and who still passed the whole of their lives in the manner which they considered the *ancien régime* prescribed, refusing to mix in the cosmopolitan society of modern Paris. But the Marquis throughout his interesting career had been too much of a philosopher ever to accept so limited a view. He might be the *grand seigneur* at home, but outside it there was no stratum of society in which he had not been prepared to find interest. He had made it his pleasure to find the best in all worlds.

The car drew up before a massive *grille* of ornamental ironwork which barred the way to a courtyard. This was closed, but looking through the window of the automobile Lina could see beyond a light shining dimly through the entrance door of the mansion. It seemed to her evidence that her ancient quarry was not yet abed.

In a twinkling the chauffeur was standing with the door held open.

"You are still sure?" de Roza ventured.

"Quite," she answered. "But I will go alone."

"Of course," he murmured. It was the only suspicion of having an independence of his own which he had shown all that night. He preceded her to the pavement, and handed her down.

A long wrought-iron bell-pull hung down outside the gate. At a sign from de Roza the chauffeur pulled it. After a long interval the door of the mansion was seen to open, and a figure came slowly down the entrance steps and across the courtyard.

It proved to be that of an ancient servitor in livery. His pale old face confronted Lina's through the *grille*.

"Madame desires?" he asked. Old as he was his eye had obviously taken in the group of three and the

impressive automobile beyond them in one comprehensive glance.

"I am Mademoiselle Lina Bernay," she said hastily, "of the Etoile Theatre. I wish to see Monsieur the Marquis at once, urgently—that is if he is still *up*."

Having listened the man weighed what she had said for the briefest moment in his mind, and then opened the gates.

"If Mademoiselle will be good enough to come with me I will convey her message," he said.

Lina passed through. The footman looked at de Roza, who shook his head. With a murmured apology he then closed the gates again, and the two went across the courtyard and into the mansion.

"If Mademoiselle will be good enough to wait here," he said, and opening a door switched on a light.

It was a small ante-room, rather like a waiting-room, soberly furnished, and a little depressing. As she sat down on a couch and the door closed on her she felt for a moment a little of what de Roza had at first tried to convey to her regarding the circumstances of this strange visit. But the feeling soon passed. Why should she be in the slightest degree troubled because she was calling on this old man at two o'clock in the morning? His life had been full enough of strange events for this not to matter. And if it inconvenienced him, so much the better. He had lived a life of utter selfishness. It was her duty now to let him know what was his share of responsibility in what was to happen in a few hours.

That thought sufficed to sweep away any doubts she had as to her visit. And she clung to a faint hope that he might even be able to help—to do something to avoid what she so dreaded.

The door opened. She had only been waiting a few moments. A good sign. The aged footman appeared.

"Monsieur le Marquis says he will be delighted to

receive Mademoiselle at once. If Mademoiselle will follow me."

She followed him up an imposing staircase, hung with tapestries. The lights had been turned full on since her entrance, she noted. It helped to dissipate the two-o'clock-in-the-morning atmosphere. She was grateful for it.

So along a landing where again the lights were full on, and into a room lofty but of medium size; a blend of library and study; rich and welcoming, with the glow of shaded lamps here and there; a multitude of volumes, all in red morocco, and the opulent shine of heavily framed oil paintings. A regal room. She felt as her eyes received it, what a fitting background it would make for Hector. And there, standing with hand outstretched, in his inevitable evening dress, was the Marquis—Hector's father!

He took her hand, with its glove, and bestowed a salute upon it.

"What a surprise—what a delightful surprise," he said, with hardly the suspicion of a quaver in his voice, so tonic an effect had the announcement of his visitor had upon him. "To think that the most delightful of all our comediennes should deign to visit an old man like me."

"It is on a serious matter," she said, yet touched despite herself by his manner. There was an air, even yet, about this old reprobate. What power he must have wielded over feminine hearts in the heyday of his charm!

"A serious matter," he repeated. "It is long since I have been so approached. Yet I can see that you look grave. Take this chair, Mademoiselle. Some refreshment?"

She shook her head, smiling a little.

"Ah, you smile. That is better." He seated himself in another easy chair near her. "Truly, a moment ago, you looked very grave. And that is the last thing

one wishes to associate with our adorable Lina Bernay . . . But yet you are troubled. That is plain. And you have come to me. I am honoured. Command me if there is anything I can do."

"I have come to you," she said, "about Hector Duval."

"Ah, your dramatist. Your *protégé*. I know the whole admirable story. You have been splendid. And a young man who would seem to be worthy of all you have done for him. . . . You have come about him, then."

"Yes, there is something about him which I must tell you. Something very important—that concerns you."

"That concerns me? It is true that when I first heard the name there was something about it that seemed vaguely familiar. But it is by no means an uncommon name. Something that concerns me? Tell me, please? "

"I may? "

"But please. I beg of you."

"Whatever it is? "

"Whatever it is."

She drew a breath, finding her announcement something of an ordeal, after all. Then she made it.

"Hector Duval, I believe, is your son."

•III

He stared at her, his eyes widening. It was not such a shock to him as it would have been to most men. And so many years had passed, so many things had happened, since he last saw Louise Marly in that private room of the *Maison Dorée*, itself long since disappeared to make room for a bright new post office. But even so it was a startling announcement.

A quaver crept into his voice.

"My dear young lady, what you say is very astounding. My son, you say! Hector Duval? I seem to remember something. But my memory is not what it was. Many things I remember vividly. Others are vague. But how do you know this? Who has told you?"

"Nobody has told me. But when you were talking to him, on the first night of his comedy . . . You remember? The reception afterwards on the stage?"

"Yes, yes. I remember."

"I saw your two profiles together. Then I knew at once. There was no mistake. I *knew*. And it explained so much that was in Hector Duval."

"Explained so much?"

"His distinction. Many things. The air of the aristocrat he had in every way. Before he puzzled me. Afterwards it was clear."

A gleam of pleasure came into his eyes.

"That is very charming of you—if it is true. But tell me, does the young man know anything of this? Did you tell him?"

"He knows nothing."

"Ah. That is very wise of you. But—if this is true, why do you come and tell me at this moment? Why so urgently now?"

"Because he is in danger. In a few hours he is going to fight a duel."

The Marquis raised his eyebrows and smiled. He was about to comment on this news, but with a wave of her hand she swept it aside. She knew what his comments were likely to be, and having heard them already from de Roza she did not want to hear them again.

"Pardon me, but I think I know what you are going to say," she went on hurriedly. "That duels are not dangerous, and that you know many people who have

fought them—yourself included—and are none the worse. But this one is different. He is going to fight Arnaud—a friend of mine, Gustave Arnaud—and I am convinced that Arnaud is determined to kill Hector. I saw Arnaud less than an hour ago. I am afraid I made matters worse. They are to use pistols. Arnaud offered to make matters easy if I would marry him. I refused, of course. He is incensed against Hector—furious and jealous. I left him with murder in his eyes. And Hector has never held a pistol, while Arnaud is a practised shot. So you see.”

The Marquis clasped his thin white hands on his knee and gazed down thoughtfully.

“ This Arnaud—is he the son of the Arnaud who was a biscuit manufacturer? ”

“ That is the man.”

“ An upstart. His father wished to join the Jockey Club, years ago, and I was one of those who kept him out. And the son—he gives himself the airs of a man of family, does he not? ”

Lina gave a half smile.

“ We had a few words on that subject just now. I told him that Hector, whom he was deriding, was much more an aristocrat than he could ever hope to be. I lost my temper, alas. That is what has made things so much worse.”

Once more the Marquis seemed to glow with satisfaction. He rubbed his hands together.

“ That was excellently said. . . . Tell me, my dear. Are you very deeply interested—tenderly interested—in this young man? ”

They regarded each other, eye to eye, and there was no trace of senility in the old man’s gaze as he looked at her.

“ He has come to mean very much to me,” she said.

“ At first I was sorry for him. Now—it would be

dreadful for me if anything happened to him. More especially as in defending him I have done much to bring this situation about."

"He is a very fortunate young man," said the Marquis. "And in view of what you have just told me . . ." He paused. "Let me see how this matter stands."

IV

He rose slowly and walked to a section of the tall book-cases, that rose almost to the ceiling. He seemed to be about to take down a book, but then Lina heard a sharp click, and to her surprise as the Marquis pulled on it the lower section of shelves swung out into the room. The Marquis felt in his pocket, and she heard the faint jingle of keys.

"Come and look, my dear," he said.

She rose and stood by him and saw that behind the opened book-case was a long shelf-like cupboard which the Marquis now opened with his key, sliding back the two halves of the panel made to enclose it. They disclosed a long row of small volumes, bound in green shagreen.

"My private diaries," he announced, in a voice which had something of awe in it. "Ever since the year 1850 when, as a young man, I decided that I would keep a record of my life. Yours is the only eye, other than my own, that has ever looked on them. My dear, there is a complete record of an old man's follies; an old man who was once a young one, and remained so for a very long while. Here, I fear me, is a *chronique scandaleuse* such as few men in my own time could have compiled. Am I ashamed of it? No. I am a cynic about life. But all the same, I would not, for any temptation, allow any other eye than my own to look in those volumes. They

would implicate half the families of France—though it is true that most of them deal with affairs of long ago. Most of the fair ones of whom I write in there were dust long ago. Some of them are now very old women. It is the same thing. There was a time when I used to read in them constantly. It was amazing to do so; the things one had forgotten, the joys and passions of long ago which were revived by reading my contemporary accounts of them. Mingled pain and pleasure. But no regrets, my dear, no regrets—except that youth vanishes. However, it is now long since I refreshed my memories. And you are the only one of all my long and numerous acquaintance who has ever seen or even heard of this faithful record of a life of pleasure. You must never mention a word of what you have seen.”

“I will not,” she said, hardly knowing what to think or say before this extraordinary revelation of an old man’s treasure.

“I only showed them to you,” he went on, “because of the interest you confessed to in this young man. An impulse on my part. A tribute if you will to your own charm and beauty. In looking at you I realize how beauty endures. There are the ghosts of dead beauties in those volumes. Yours is living, and after you there will be others. I sometimes dwell on the thought of beauties who are yet to be born, and of the young men, and old men, yet to be, who will be enslaved by them. A strange thing, existence. . . . If any publisher could secure that record what a sensation he would cause! The book of centuries. But that will never be. Ha, ha.” He laughed happily. “One may write such things, but one does not give them to the world. And now let me see.”

He took down the first of the small volumes, and as he turned its leaves Lina saw with astonishment that it was an index. The Marquis had not merely written down

the ordeal, as so many of us have done. My dear, I fought five duels. Twice I was scratched—once rather deeply, it is true. But have I been any the worse for it? ” He laughed.

“ You fenced well, no doubt? ”

“ I was accounted quite good.”

“ This is different.” Her tone hardened. “ Your son has not been trained in such arts. His life as a barber did not give him the opportunity. And this is with pistols, of which also he knows nothing; and Arnaud is, I know it, a dead shot. You do not know what forces will be at work in a few hours, and why. I must tell you, exactly. It is my duty to tell you, and yours to know.”

Briefly but incisively she explained to him the exact circumstances which had led up to the quarrel; why Hector had been so angry, and why Arnaud was now so deadly. She made her short and concentrated narrative live and glow with all the arts that came so naturally to her. He followed her every word and movement intently. When it was all said he relaxed visibly in his chair.

“ My dear, I did not realize. It is a situation, is it not! Truly, a situation. I realize your agitation, I honour you for all you feel for this young man . . . ”

“ Your son.”

“ My son. But believe me, as one of much experience, as one who wishes you well, who is honoured and moved to think that this extraordinary chain of circumstances should have brought us so closely together—the issue of this affair will not be so grave as you think. Hector will live to look back with interest on his encounter, as so many of us have done. I feel it, absolutely, and you must not allow yourself to think otherwise.”

She found no comfort whatever in this.

“ I should like to believe as you do,” she said. “ But I have seen Arnaud and I know that there is danger, the greatest danger. Hector will be sacrificed, and I can think

of nothing else but that. In a few hours your son may be dead. Is there no hope, no possible chance, of something being done? It is horrible that he should have to undergo such risk in such a cause. He may be murdered—in the name of honour.”

The Marquis shook his head slowly.

“There can be no hope of that. It has gone much too far. And as my son I am sure he would not allow anything to be done, even if it were possible. No, my dear, you must wait with all the fortitude you can command, until it is over. And I am sure all will be well. He may even be the victor.”

That roused her.

“Victor!” she flashed. “Over what? What victory would there be even if he succeeded in shooting a man like Arnaud? It is all stupid, insane. But you know everything now. You know that your son is in danger, grave danger. I felt I ought to tell you, and I have told you. There is no more to be said.” She rose suddenly to go.

VI

He rose with her.

“That there is *some* danger, my dear, is no doubt true. But not to the extent to which you have persuaded yourself.” He laid his hand on her arm, and she felt that for once in his life Hector’s father was caressing a woman from a purely worthy motive. “And so convinced am I of this that I have already decided that I must do something for Hector’s future. There is great literary promise in him, but he will need some moral and material support after that unhappy affair of the *Clairon*. I am going to say something that will please you. Many years ago I acquired some shares in the elder Arnaud’s biscuit factory.

One may refuse to know a certain type of bourgeois, but that is no reason why one should not make money out of him. It was not a very large number of shares, but they were the original shares and have since become very valuable. • They bring in quite sufficient to subsidize very handsomely a young man of letters. Those shares I shall at once transfer to Hector."

He smiled at her, waiting for her approbation.

"It is very good of you," she said, not feeling it. The proposal seemed to her to have no interest beyond the ironic one of being too late. "Very good," she repeated stonily, and moved to the door.

He held it open for her, and accompanied her along the corridor and down the broad staircase, still blazing with lights, and so to the main door.

He raised her hand again to his lips as she turned to him to take her leave.

"Courage, my child," he said. "All will yet be well. You will see."

Outside she found de Roza sitting alert and tireless in the limousine, a drooping Marcelle facing him. He was out on to the pavement in a twinkling as he perceived her.

"You have been very good to me to-night," she said, compassion coming to her.

"It has been a privilege, dear Lina, to have been of service to you," he replied gravely. "Has your visit been of any help?"

"None whatever," she said.

"I have done all I can," she said to Marcelle, as the car rolled away, "but it is hopeless. Men in these things are like children—tragic children. Would you like to stay with me to-night?"

Marcelle shook her head, and there was silence as the car rolled on its way. The Brazilian felt that the funereal atmosphere was a little overdone. A duel was a duel, and this one, he now recognized, was a really serious affair,

but the two women were, so to speak, condemning their friend in advance.

His thoughts were very busy with the extraordinary revelation Lina had made about Hector, and he would have been glad to know more about it. It was a development that pleased him less and less . . . Still, it might be that Lina's fears about the duel would prove to be well-founded. That was a new train of thought. A strange situation for a man in love!

CHAPTER XXVI

I

A few hours later Hector's party set out on the drive to the Parc des Princes. De Bac sat with Hector, and facing them were Dufayel and the surgeon they had found for the occasion. He was a thin-faced man, with a rather melancholy air, and Hector derived no great pleasure from regarding him.

Yet the party hardly wore the air of gravity which might have been expected from its serious errand. The two inseparables had arranged this in advance.

"Do not let us, for heaven's sake, be speechless on the way out," de Bac had said. "We must keep the poor devil's spirits up as much as possible."

Therefore, by arrangement, they began to discuss an amusing incident at the Palais Royal, where their latest play was in course of being produced, and to his surprise Hector found himself diverted by what they were saying. It was a story of one of those sudden explosions of jealousy which are not unknown to the world of the theatre, between two actresses, and of the means which they had been compelled to take to smooth out ruffled tempers, so as to allow rehearsals to proceed again.

It was quite a success as a story and lasted for a considerable part of the journey. But once this excellent piece of acting had been disposed of the two friends found it very difficult to keep up the pretence of unconcern.

"It is a glorious morning," said de Bac, and stopped short. He, a model of tact, had in that simple sentence committed something very like a *faux pas*.

"Delightful," echoed Hector, with a rather wintry smile, 'if one were only going for a ride' .

After that conversation died. They passed the Trocadero, and went on through Passy to Auteuil. It seemed to Hector a long way to go for something that would happen so quickly.

As he looked out of the window he asked himself if he was very afraid. He found it difficult to answer the question. Resigned perhaps was the word. It all seemed so natural, now that it had come to pass. All that had happened to him since he had left St. Medard seemed to have been destined inevitably to this end.

The only physical sensation he had was a faint, sinking feeling somewhere in the pit of his stomach. For the rest his body felt strangely inert and powerless, as though his spirit had already left it, leaving only the unimportant corporeal shape of him, impeccably clad for this encounter.

Everything seemed strangely unreal. Lina? No doubt she would be sorry. She would get his letter, and would then understand everything. But he found to his surprise that the thought of her caused him no great anguish. He could not feel. And Dr. Lemoine? He would be very upset and would utter great Rabelaisian oaths directed at Arnaud . . . Poor Marcelle! She would feel it. She had so little in her life to fall back upon.

They stopped outside a small gate, which after a moment's delay was opened to them, and the automobile rolled harshly over a gravelled path. Two other automobiles were already waiting there. They got out, crossed an asphalt cycling track, and walked towards where, in the centre of the "velodrome," a small group of men were standing. They halted some distance from

them and de Bac and Dufayel went on alone, with the surgeon. Hector, standing on the short grass, felt like an atom in the midst of immensity. Far away he could see the roofs of some tall apartment houses on the outer edge of Paris. He wondered whether he would ever see Paris again.

Then de Bac and Dufayel returned with a stranger, and he found himself shaking hands with a stocky and rather portly but very striking looking man, with picturesque grey hair and a *mousquetaire* beard. It was the famous Severin-Blanchard of whom he had often heard, the arranger and arbitrator of nearly all the duels in Paris. M. Severin-Blanchard gave him a grip that felt like an iron vice, and said amiable things in a hearty voice.

From that moment events seemed to rush along. He was there, no doubt, to be killed, and there was no delay in the carrying out of the project. He had little or no time to think, had he been capable of it. Severin-Blanchard came to speak to him again, repeating the formal terms of the combat. He would call the words "One-two-three-fire," and Hector was not to shoot until after the first word nor after the last one.

He found himself with his collar, coat and waistcoat off, and with a heavy duelling pistol hanging from his hand. De Bac and Dufayel were about him, speaking urgently and rapidly.

"Now don't forget," said de Bac finally. "Grip it hard, aim low, and aim instinctively."

He saw Arnaud now facing him at what seemed a ridiculously small distance, and at that sight Hector's brain cleared. Arnaud too was in a white shirt, and stood detached from all else with startling clearness. Hector felt himself again, with all his faculties on the alert, and to his great joy he did not feel afraid. He gritted his teeth. If he was to be killed he would try

to kill. There could be no nonsense of firing in the air against such an implacable adversary.

The moment had come. He was aware of Severin-Blanchard standing poised, ready to call the words that meant so much; of the grouping of his own seconds and the others. And then, so cool had he suddenly become, he decided there was one point which should be cleared up beyond any doubt.

"One moment," he called to his seconds, and they hurried up.

"This is really serious?" he questioned them calmly.

"It is serious," said de Bac.

"Undoubtedly," said Dufayel.

"That is all I wanted to know. Many thanks, my friends."

They hurried back to their stations. He heard the first word from Severin-Blanchard, raised the pistol to his hip, and as he heard the second word fired. With the loud report he felt the pistol leap in his hand. There came what seemed an echo to his own shot, and on the instant he had the sensation that something curious, something indefinable, had happened to him. His legs seemed to fail him, he swayed drunkenly, and subsided to the grass.

Hector lay on his back quite conscious and free from pain. He saw the blue sky above him, with a few fleecy white clouds sailing across it. If this was the end it was quite pleasant.

He became aware that de Bac and Dufayel were standing looking down on him; and that somebody was busy-ing himself with some part of his anatomy. After a time he heard the surgeon's voice:

"High up in the thigh, near the groin."

The surgeon gave him something to drink. His seconds went away and returned after what seemed a long interval. Then he heard the sound of an automobile

approaching. He was lifted up carefully and placed on the rear seat, with his legs stretched out as far as possible, and the surgeon and De Bac sitting opposite. Dufayel, he was told, was in front with the driver.

"How goes it, old fellow?" asked de Bac as they rolled off very slowly.

"Not bad," answered Hector with a faint smile. "And the other one?"

"Just grazed. He had all the luck. Your ball ripped through his shirt at the shoulder. But for a very lucky chance he would have had it. Somewhere else. You aimed truly."

"That is enough," said the surgeon, with hand upraised. "No more talking."

"One question," said Hector. "Where are you taking me?"

"To the clinic of Dr. Perrières, at Auteuil," said de Bac. "You will be well looked after there. It is not very far."

But to Hector the journey seemed a very long one. The sensation of calm content passed away, and he began to feel faint and ill. Somewhere there was a racking pain, which seemed to get rapidly worse until his whole body throbbed with it.

"Say then, my friend," he murmured to de Bac. "There are three letters in my coat. Take them, and if anything happens to me see that they are delivered. And many thanks."

With that he fainted.

II

An hour after Hector had been left at the clinic the two inseparables called at Lina's flat. They had agreed that she should be the first to hear the news.

They were both startled to see her pale and anxious face as she came into the room to them.

"I know why you are here," she exclaimed. "Tell me, what is the news of him. He is not dead?"

"Ah, no, happily not that," replied de Bac. "It is a serious wound, but the surgeon says that all ought to be well."

"Thank God for that. What a night I have passed! I have not slept." Her hands were clasped in her emotion. "But you say it is serious. What does that mean? Is it grave? Where is he hit? Is he in real danger of his life? Tell me. I must know exactly."

The two men exchanged a rapid glance. They had not anticipated such a supreme degree of concern on her part.

"De Bac said quite truly," Dufayel answered in his turn. "It is a serious wound. The surgeon did not say grave. There is every reason to think all will go on well. Truly. He is in the best hands."

"I feel you are telling me the truth," she murmured, her face relaxing a little from its strained expression. "And I thank you, my friends, for having been kind to him. He needed it, did he not, the poor fellow. And now let us sit down. Tell me what happened this morning."

De Bac told the story of the duel. He spoke as simply as possible, and carefully refrained from making his narrative dramatic. But there were tears in her eyes when he spoke of Hector falling.

"Ah, what infamy!" she cried. "After all that has been done to him, to think he should be shot down like that! It gladdens my heart to think that you two, who have seen it all, were with him. And that monster, that despicable little monster. What of him? To think he should escape while Hector lies there."

"He was very fortunate in escaping," said de Bac.

"It is to an amazing accident that he owes his life. This duel is one of the most remarkable that ever happened. But for this extraordinary accident Arnaud would now be dead." He omitted to say that but for this same accident Hector would also be dead.

"How?" exclaimed Lina. "I do not understand. Hector had never fired a pistol in his life."

"No. He aimed instinctively as I instructed him. And as it proved he aimed true. He fired a fraction of a second before Arnaud, and his bullet struck the tip of Arnaud's pistol. Think of what an extraordinary chance that is! We saw the little silver mark it made. Consequently Hector's bullet was deflected upwards, and merely grazed Arnaud's shoulder. For the same reason, and at the exact moment he fired, Arnaud's pistol was deflected downwards, so that Hector received the shot much lower than he otherwise would have done. But Arnaud had most of the luck. He would have certainly been killed otherwise. You ought to have heard Severin-Blanchard's comments on all this. He said it was the most extraordinary happening in a duel he had ever heard of. And he has seen hundreds and studied the records of thousands."

Lina sat for an appreciable time, puzzling out the exact meaning of all this.

"But Arnaud is supposed to be a dead shot, is he not?"

They both agreed that this was generally understood to be so.

"Then he aimed to kill," she cried, "as I thought he would. You have dwelt most on Hector's shot. But think of Arnaud's. Not only did Arnaud have a very narrow escape from instant death, but so did Hector. Had Hector shot wide, as was almost certain to happen, then Arnaud's pistol would not have been disturbed, and Hector would have been dead. His straight aim was a fluke. But Arnaud is a dead shot, and he shot to kill.

Do you not see how infamous his conduct has been? He is an assassin! Merely that! "An assassin!"

"The chances were certainly far from equal," said de Bac a little guardedly.

She jumped up and stood over them, speaking hotly, her words coming in a torrent.

"Oh, but it was infinitely worse than that, Messieurs. You know that he had forced Hector to this, that he had insulted him, goaded him. You know that he caused that lying interview to be put in the *Moniteur*. I heard last night there was to be a duel. Early this morning I went to see Arnaud. I pleaded with him that this should be, like so many other duels, a matter that could be tacitly arranged. He had the insolence, that man, to say that if I would promise to marry him he would see that nothing happened to Hector. That shows the duel *could* have been arranged had I agreed to Arnaud's terms. You see the position in which he placed me! Other things occurred, of which I will not tell you. That odious little mistress of his, Fifi D'Artois, was there. I am afraid I made matters worse, and I passed an agonizing night in consequence. But I told Arnaud that if anything grave happened I would see that his name would be infamous throughout Paris. And you will see—you will see now what his name will be worth in Paris!"

Her breast heaved with the intensity of her emotions, her looks seeming to condemn them for not feeling as she did.

"You are right," de Bac acknowledged. "It has been an ugly business."

"A dirty affair!" said Dufayel.

"A dirty affair!" she echoed. "Ah, but you do not feel as I do, when I think of this gentle soul being tortured as he has been. And Arnaud despised him because he had been a barber! Why, Hector compares with him as a knight errant does to a hired bravo . . ."

CHAPTER XXVII

I

For three days following the extraction of the heavy pistol ball Hector lay in a critical condition. They were three days during which the latest development of the "affaire Hector Duval" provided much sensation for the Paris newspapers. The old story was told again, and the new chapter of it exploited to the full. Interviews with de Bac and Dufayel appeared everywhere, and though the two friends told the story of the duel they maintained an attitude of reserve in their comments on Arnaud's part in it.

Lina showed no such reserve. During all this period she had kept in constant touch by telephone with the clinic, a prey to alternate hopes and fears. She had soon learned, following on the visit of de Bac and Dufayel, that they had, out of regard for her, understated the gravity of Hector's condition, and she had lived in an agony of apprehension until word came from Dr. Perrières that his patient could be considered to have definitely turned the corner.

Thus when the newspaper reporters called on her she had spoken her mind with regard to Arnaud, as she had threatened she would, and some of the newspapers had exercised to the full that freedom of comment which is permitted in Paris. Arnaud had been given a very "bad Press." In the affair of Hector Duval he now figured

definitely as the villain of the piece. The word "assassin" had been used.

It was not until six days after the duel that Lina was allowed to visit Hector. Her heart beat high as her motor-car drew up before the entrance to the famous private hospital. She no longer tried to conceal her true sentiments from herself, and she cared not who else knew them. She loved this man and was going to him in a glow of relief and happiness that he was now out of danger.

She found him in a severely furnished room overlooking a sunlit garden. The elderly and plain *garde-malade* looked up with astonishment as this vision of youth and beauty, dressed in a simple but ravishing costume, came in.

"You must only stay a little while, and not talk much, Madame," said the nurse, and went out.

Lina smiled down at Hector without speaking, and he returned her smile. A great deal passed between them in that moment of silence. They were nearer together than they had ever been before. She noticed how the pallor of his face intensified the golden hue of his Vandyke beard. His eyes were large and luminous. He seemed to her to be something of a saint as he lay there.

She sat down by the bedside and held his hand.

"Are you feeling better now, my dear Hector?" she asked softly.

Her voice sounded miraculously sweet to him.

"Much better, thank you," he returned, and she was touched at the change in his voice. She had never been ill herself, and she found unexpected motherly instincts stirred by the sight of this big helpless man.

"They tell me I shall be all right now," he went on. "Perhaps there will be a little limp."

"My poor friend," she murmured, squeezing his hand tenderly.

"It is good of you to come and see me," he went on.

"Ah, if you knew what I have suffered since I had the news. I have telephoned here five and six times a day, and always at night before leaving the theatre. . . . Oh, it has been terrible to be there waiting, knowing that you were in such danger."

He seemed to wonder a little as this. As she looked at him she suddenly made up her mind to tell him. It did not seem difficult with him lying there helpless.

"Listen. The nurse said I was not to stop long and not to talk much. I must say something important to you before she comes in again. Something wonderful."

"Say it."

"Cannot you guess?" she murmured tenderly, her eyes shining down on him.

What Dr. Lemoine had said to him came into his mind, but he dare not give utterance to it. Even now with her face bending down close to his own, it seemed too absurdly impossible. He could look deep into her violet eyes. They seemed lakes of tenderness. But he could not trust himself to speak.

He shook his head.

"I love you, *mon ami*, I love you," she whispered. "I want you to know it, so that you will be happy and get better quickly. . . . That is, if it makes you happy."

His eyes widened even more at this.

"Lina . . . Lina . . . is this true? . . . Oh, Lina!"

"It is true, *mon bien aimé*. It is true. I have realized it while you have been lying here, and I came to tell you."

"But, Lina, you cannot love *me*. What will everybody say?"

"They can say what they like. I shall be proud of you."

He still gazed at her, trying fully to comprehend the wonderful news.

"Kiss me," he murmured. "My adored one, kiss me."

She bent down and kissed him tenderly on the lips, lifted her head to look at him, and kissed him again. As she stood up the nurse entered.

"Madame will not be able to stay much longer," she said.

Lina nodded. She took a letter from her bag, and held it up.

"I have brought this for you. De Bac gave it to me."

"Keep it," he said with a smile. "You will perhaps like what is inside."

"Ah, my dearest, I have already read it," she laughed happily. And then, further to his amazement, she bent down to embrace him again, despite the presence of the nurse.

"I will come again as soon as they let me," she said, and with a smile was gone, leaving behind a man who had been admitted to Paradise.

II

It was to be a day of miraculous visits for Hector.

Late that afternoon it was announced that the Marquis de Malvoisin-Montigny was below, and desired to see him. The nurse asked him if he felt well enough to see another visitor.

"By all means," said Hector, still aglow with what had happened to him that morning. With the glorious news that Lina had told him animating him like a celestial cordial he felt equal to anything. But he wondered what could have brought the Marquis to see him.

The old man entered, elegant as ever, waved the nurse out of the room, and took his seat by the bedside.

"My young friend, how goes it with you?" he asked kindly.

"I am very much better," said Hector.

"Quite out of danger, I am told. That is splendid. I have followed all that has happened since you came to Paris with the greatest interest. I congratulate you that, at last, your trials seem to be over. And I have an announcement to make to you which I trust will not be of too distressing a character; which I trust indeed will fall more pleasantly on your ears than otherwise. May I make it? Do you feel equal to learning something of great importance to you?"

"Quite, thank you," replied Hector, wondering more than ever.

"It appears, then, that I am your father." The Marquis smiled graciously as he said it.

Hector stared, astounded.

"My father!" He hardly more than whispered it.

"So it appears. The fact was first imparted to me by your charming friend, Lina Bernay, who takes such a tender interest in you. I was amazed, too. But there appears to be no doubt of the fact."

"I don't understand," said Hector weakly, finding further cause for amazement in this.

"It is quite simple," the Marquis went on. "The young lady who has been such a wonderful friend to you discovered the fact on the night of the production of your play, when we were talking together—you remember. She decided at that moment that we were father and son. On the night before the duel, which she did her best to prevent, she came to me and told me the news. I was soon able to confirm it.

"Years ago, Hector, I loved your mother. I loved her very deeply." The Marquis felt that the special circumstances demanded that he should say this. "She loved me, too. But, as you will understand, marriage

was impossible. There is no need to stress that point. The world is like that. Apart from that, it was then, and still is, my firm intention never to marry. She went away and married the man whom you have always known as your father, who understood the whole circumstances. He was a good man to do what he did, for love of your mother—but he was not your father. That honour belongs to me.”

Hector stared at him, speechless. There was so much to think of, to readjust, as his mind raced back through the years. What had just been said to him illuminated and explained his life—his father and his mother—as though by the glare of lightning. He could think, but he could find nothing to say.

“All this, as I say, I only learned a few hours before you fought,” the Marquis went on. “For the present, at any rate, all this is between ourselves. It is for your own satisfaction, so that you may understand yourself better, so that you may realize whence comes this distinction of mind and of person which has for so long, no doubt, been a source of wonderment to you. And permit me to say, my son, that I am proud of you. Had you remained a barber—no. But you are a poet, an artist, you are of the world of the elect. You have achieved it by your own inherited qualities, and I must see to it that there you may remain. I have heard all about the affair of the *Clairon*. There need be no need in the future for you to be dependent on such *canaille* as this Trouchet person.”

Hector, still staring, spoke at last.

“I do not know what to say.”

“Naturally,” said the Marquis kindly. “The circumstances are unusual. But there is the situation. I am proud that you fought this man Arnaud so courageously, though the chances were against you. It is what I should have expected. Your ancestors have always fought.

Blood, my son, must tell. His father was a biscuit manufacturer. His grandfather was possibly a peasant, perhaps even a concierge. One never knows with these people, and it does not matter. But even from such people one may derive, without loss of dignity, a certain measure of satisfaction. Years ago, my dear Hector, I invested a modest amount of money in the biscuit shares of the elder Arnaud. His business flourished amazingly—he discovered, it seems, a certain type of biscuit for which the nation had been waiting—and the value of my shares increased proportionately. These I now propose to transfer to you. They will more than replace, I imagine, what came to you from the *Clairon*, and they will be an ample subsidy for any young man devoting himself to literature. If later you wish to sell the shares and invest the money in some other manner—your feelings about the name of Arnaud may prompt you to do that—then, of course, you may do so. That is for you to say. But it pleases me that one who has suffered so much from one of that name should now be able to take a subtle revenge by living in comfort on this product of bourgeois ingenuity, and it pleases me still more that I should, however tardily, acknowledge my responsibility to one who is bound to me by ties of such peculiar intimacy.”

His speech having concluded the Marquis regarded Hector with a smile which reflected his complete satisfaction in his handling of the situation.

There was silence for a time, while father and son regarded each other.

“You said, my son?” observed the Marquis.

“I said nothing,” replied Hector. “I do not know what to say. But I feel I ought not to accept your offer.”

“I half expected you to say something of the kind. It is, no doubt, well said. But believe me you would be very foolish to refuse it.” He rose. “I shall come and see

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you again before you leave here. And as soon as you are better you must come and see me. Au revoir."

"Au revoir," replied Hector, and as the door closed behind his visitor he remained staring at the ceiling, his thoughts a tumult of the past and the present.

CHAPTER XXVIII

I

LINA went away from Hector's bedside with a singing heart, feeling like a young girl in love for the first time. Her radiant visage caused much comment and satisfaction at the theatre that night, where for days past her obvious anxiety had weighed on everybody. There had been packed houses every night, in part a result of the enormous publicity in the newspapers, and she herself on this occasion felt that she had played in Hector's comedy as she had never played before.

After the curtain had finally rung down, following on what was a prolonged explosion of applause, she returned to her dressing-room to find Marcelle waiting for her. Lina had given instructions during the week that Marcelle was to be shown up whenever she called.

Lina greeted her warmly. She felt a sister to everybody.

"I went up this evening to try to see him," said Marcelle, "but they would not let me in. They told me that you had been there—also the old Marquis."

"Ah!" exclaimed Lina with interest. "I did not know that."

"And that he could not have any more visitors yet," Marcelle looked very forlorn as she said it.

"My poor Marcelle," said Lina caressingly. "Yes, I.

was more fortunate. But perhaps they were right. He is not in a state yet to see too many visitors."

"It does not matter." Marcelle was on the verge of tears. "How was he looking?"

"Very white, Marcelle, very shaken. He has been very close to death. But they say that all danger is really past now."

"Ah." Marcelle emitted a sigh, and her tears seemed about to flow. "It does not matter. In any case I wanted to come and see you. There is something I want to say to you." She struggled hard to keep her tears in check, and now looked at Lina defiantly from moistened eyes.

"But what is it? Tell me."

"You love him! You love him, I tell you! Do not deny it."

The two women gazed at each other, Marcelle fiercely, Lina all tenderness and compassion.

"It is true, Marcelle."

"Then why did you not tell me?" she cried, feline in her anger, her pretty face distorted. "Why did you let me come here, that night before the duel, pouring out my heart to you, while you all the time said nothing?"

"But, Marcelle, I did not know it myself until . . . until very recently."

"But I—I loved him all the time, ever since he has been in Paris. He belongs to me. He is not for you. He is my kind—or was until you found out all about him. You could have your pick of all Paris. Why take him, the only man I want? And now, what chance have I against you, with your beauty and your luxury! . . . Oh! . . . Oh!" And without any warning her fierceness vanished and her tears came with a rush.

Lina put her arms round her, mothering her tenderly.

"My poor Marcelle. I can't help loving him any more

than you can. It has happened—that is all. It was fated, Marcelle. And you and I are friends. We have suffered together. We must not quarrel. . . . Come, my dear.”

She lifted her tear-stained face. Marcelle seemed to be on the point of surrendering herself to so much sisterly charm. But suddenly she wrenched herself free, and flamed again at Lina.

“No, thank you. You must keep all your tenderness for him—for your aristocrat! I only wanted to know.” And without another word she turned and rushed from the room.

Her headlong flight took her out through the stage door and on to the pavement. There she stopped, overwhelmed with misery but already regretting what she had done, and wondering whether she could find the courage to return and tell Lina so. As she stood there, fighting within herself, a large motor-car which was familiar to her rolled up and stopped. The chauffeur got down to open the door, and Senhor de Roza stood before her.

II

The Brazilian had arrived on the final stage of a quest which to him was as dear as ever, but as to the success of which he had latterly come to entertain some doubts. Ever since those astonishing hours preceding the duel he had come to the conclusion that in Hector he had a rival who really counted.

Absurd though it might be, judged by all that was reasonable, this discovery regarding Hector's parentage made a definite difference. Before he had hovered on the border-

land of the romantic. Now he had definitely crossed over. The Brazilian had been uneasily aware during the past week of Lina's extreme anxiety, and while making the fullest allowance for every other motive he had not been able to dismiss the idea that her concern was grounded on something deeper than friendship for a *protégé*.

In short he had come to the conclusion that with his suit it was touch and go, with the odds perhaps very slightly in his favour. Lina might be very fond of her Hector. But when it came to the definite step of marriage he felt that the de Roza millions ought to be very eloquent on his behalf. There was romance in those also.

And now he had come to discover if that was so. The week Lina had asked for had elapsed. Within a few moments he would know. He was amazed at the state of strain and anxiety in which he found himself. All for a woman! He wanted her hungrily, body and soul, and he had arrived at the stage when he did not care if he frankly had to buy her—if only she would permit him.

He stepped out on to the pavement with his middle-aged heart all a-flutter, to find himself confronting Marcelle.

"You, Marcelle. Are you waiting to see Mademoiselle Bernay? . . . But what is the matter? You look very distressed."

She gazed at him stonily, her eyes still bearing the traces of tears.

"I have just come down from seeing her. It is no use your going up. You will only be wasting your time."

She spoke harshly. It gave her some relief to know that here was another who was going to be unhappy—despite his millions.

"What do you mean, Marcelle—speaking to me like that?" The millionaire spoke with some asperity. He

had shown himself very kind and gracious to Marcelle. But he could not allow her to go too far in familiarity. Yet the sinking of his heart told him that Marcelle's manner was in some way bound up with bad news for him.

"I mean that it is no use your going up there because she will only tell you what she has just told me. I accused her of loving the man I love, and she confessed that she did. So you see we are both left."

Senhor de Roza stared at her. It was a ridiculous thing that his dream of love and passion should be shattered in such a manner as this, on the pavement, from the lips of a humble workgirl, with tear stains on her face, and the fierce light of a plebeian jealousy in her eyes. But for the moment he did not see it like that.

"You mean Hector?" he said.

"Yes. She went to see him at the clinic to-day. Oh, but you can see it in her eyes, even if she hadn't said it. She is like a young girl with her first love. And when I accused her of stealing the man I wanted—the man who was nearly mine—she was quite humble, and said she couldn't help loving him."

The millionaire drew in his breath. This was very hard. It hurt, terribly. He had lost, then, this Grand Prix—the only one that mattered to him. Riches and middle age had been badly beaten by youth and romance. He felt his age enfolding him like a sombre mantle. He was silent for a time, frowning down at the pavement, while Marcelle, angry with herself again at this fresh outburst, stared with tearful eyes over his shoulder.

"Can I drive you anywhere?" he asked at last.

"No, thank you. I would rather be alone just now. I'm sorry. *Bon soir*, Monsieur de Roza." And Marcelle hurried round the corner and was gone.

The millionaire stood in further thought for some few

moments. He was trying to beat down the desire that flamed within him to go up and see Lina despite all that he had learned—to go up to her and argue, even plead.

He conquered. If he was to see Lina again, this was not the moment. It would be fatal to any faint hope that remained. He was in too weak a state at the moment to face her. Some other time—on the morrow, perhaps. But now he needed time to think. He told his chauffeur to drive him to his *cercle* on the Boulevard des Capucines. This was the moment when a little high play was the best tonic a man could have.

As he entered the vestibule of the club he came face to face with Arnaud, just on his way out. It was the first time they had met since that scene of tension on the night before the duel.

For a moment the two men stared at each other, silent. There was electricity in the air. The eyes of the Brazilian glittered, like those of a snake. He spoke first.

“Well, and how goes your victim?”

Arnaud paled. The worst of the hubbub had begun to die down in the newspapers. But Arnaud was not free of it. It met him wherever he went. It was like a curse—a curse put upon him by Lina.

“I will ask you not to speak to me of that matter in such a fashion,” he grated. “I am beginning to have enough of it.”

“You will have a good deal more before you have finished.” The millionaire laughed sardonically. “You have made a pretty mess of the whole affair, haven’t you? You tried to exterminate your rival—our rival—and do you know what you have done? You have thrown Lina into his arms. She loves him, and says so—this young man whom you may be interested to learn proves to be the son of that delightful old reprobate the Marquis de Malvoisin-Montigny. Almost our equal, eh? Half of

him, anyhow. In fact we might say that that particular half of him is superior to either of us."

"Be careful," growled Arnaud. The announcement had not come entirely as news to him, but he felt an extra pin-prick at the Brazilian's manner of conveying and commenting on it.

De Roza laughed as though he had not heard.

"There were three of us," he cried, and flung his arms wide. "Three of us—and the barber has won. It will be another pretty story for Paris when it is known, won't it? And but for your blundering, your petty spite against this man, she would have been mine. She . . ."

"Yours!" scoffed Arnaud, forcing a laugh that twisted his face. "Yours!"

"Yes, mine." The Brazilian gritted his white teeth. "She had all but promised. She was to have let me know—to have consented—to-night. And because of this melodramatic plotting of yours, this writing of cheap plays in real life, and this infamous duel . . ."

Arnaud quivered with rage.

"And I tell you," he cried, "that I have heard enough of that! Enough of that cursed duel! As for you and Lina, do you think that a coffee-coloured individual like you . . ."

Quick as light the Brazilian threw out his arm and implanted on Arnaud's white cheek a vigorous smack that echoed through the vestibule. Two members coming through the swing doors stood amazed. An attendant in livery who had darted after Arnaud's monocle, sent flying by the shock, stood ruefully examining the pieces, wondering whether to pick them up and restore them, or leave them there. An odd problem in tact.

Arnaud stood as if turned to stone, a pale statue. For a few moments he was incapable of speech. Then he murmured hoarsely:

"By God you shall pay for this."

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"At any hour and in any place that is convenient to you," said the Brazilian with a bow, and passed on into the *cercle*.

"Decidedly," he murmured to himself, as he mounted the grand staircase, "a little baccarat will go well with me to-night."

EPILOGUE

RATHER more than a week later Lina returned from a visit to Auteuil, happy at Hector's continued good progress, when she found a letter waiting for her in Senhor de Roza's handwriting. Opening it she found that it was dated from the liner *Brésil* at Havre.

"MY VERY DEAR LINA," it began, "I have just received a telegram to say that Arnaud will certainly live. I am very glad of this, for every reason. At the moment my sword passed through him I am afraid I was quite indifferent as to what happened. But now I realize that it is far better for all concerned—Arnaud even included—that he should recover, quite apart from my own peace of mind, on which matter I will not dwell. His death would have invested him with an air of importance which he hardly deserves. Though he has made much mischief, he was but a little man in every way—he was not of the stuff of which real villains are made. He was merely vanity, but despite that he had courage. Are there, by the way, any real villains in this life? I doubt it. We are most of us very mixed. There are moments when I would gladly have been a villain if it would have helped me to capture you. But as to Arnaud, though I am glad to know that he will recover, I am equally glad to think that in his turn he will have a month or so of immobility during which he will have ample time to reflect that going

out on to what is called the field of honour is not always a pleasant diversion.

"Enough of Arnaud. I am returning home, *ma bien aimée*. It is fate. Those pressing affairs which for so long called me in vain will now be attended to. Having already more money than I know what to do with I must return to make more. And now that I am going, never, alas, to see you or Paris again, I am going to write as I feel.

"Towards the end of our acquaintance, at any rate, I loved you very deeply. Up to then I desired to capture you. After that I was only too anxious to be captured by you. This is the miracle which virtue in a woman may work in a man who up to then had, perhaps, thought only of his own pleasures and the gratification of them. I feel that you know this already—perhaps that you appreciate it. But my real romance came too late. Evidently one has not the right to fall in love at fifty-five. That is not done. I came to Paris seeking my lost youth. I thought I had found it, but alas it eluded me. It is a story which, I believe, has been heard before. And yet I think I might have succeeded even with you had my affairs not become entangled with those of your romantic Hector. But he is of the stuff of true Romance, and when you told me of your discovery concerning him I realized that all was over. One could not expect to withstand such a *coup de théâtre* as that!

"I shall think of you often, always with tenderness. Give my warm regards to the man you have chosen to make happy—and tell him that I hope he will soon have left his clinic behind, to make you happy. You have shown the world that petty things do not matter where true worth is concerned, and the world will respect you as much as he loves you. Hector has been a little on my mind. I feel that I owe him something for that unfortunate affair of the *Clairon*. I have written to my bankers in

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Paris concerning him, and hope that neither of you will find anything to object to in this. It is my wedding present to my successful rival.

"You will be interested to know that Marcelle is on board. Before leaving Paris I looked her up to see what I could do for her. She begged me to take her away from Paris. Oh, do not be mistaken! There is no sentiment, or any other kind of emotion. She has a cabin and a maid. I am to open a shop for her in Rio de Janeiro, and no doubt she will make a lot of money, and later marry well. Just a millionaire's whim. It is pleasant to be able to do these things. From time to time I shall no doubt see her over there, when we shall talk of Paris and those we knew. She sends her warmest regards to you and to Hector.

"Adieu. Think of me sometimes."

Lina's eyes were moist by the time she had finished reading.

"There is more than one good man in the world," she murmured, and kissed the letter.

Thus in his absence did Senhor de Roza achieve more than all his wooing in person had brought him.

